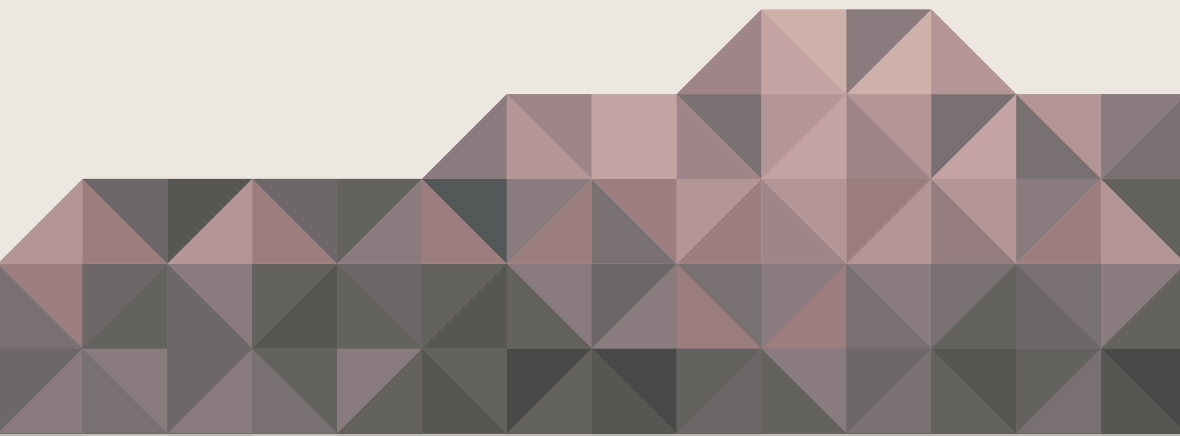
The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp



Knutpunkt 2014

Edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen & Jon Back

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Acknowledgements

This book has been a collective effort. It stands on the shoulders of the entire Nordic larp community, not just those authors reprinted here. Every organizer, every player whether the veteran of a hundred characters across decades or just stepping into her first shoes, every writer who has sweated to help those lives come to life, the theorists who help us introspect and understand our work, and every single person, often unnamed behind the scenes, who has helped with the million practical tasks it takes to make a world real, every one of these people is a part of the making of this book. We acknowledge here the task of taking that body of work into the world, and thank all of you for creating this amazing thing we attempt to share here.

We'd also like to thank some specific people whose contributions have been essential to our rather smaller effort at hand, including (in no particular order) Andie Nordgren, Lizzie Stark, Juliane Mikkelsen, Claus Raasted, Mikkel Rode, Carsten Brorson Prag, Jaakko Stenros, Petter Karlsson, Elin Nilsen, and the entire organizing group for the 2014 Knutpunkt.

— Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen, & Jon Back, editors.

Preface

If you're reading this from within the Nordic larp community, welcome to the less traditional and more historical of this year's two Knutpunkt books. If you're just joining us from outside the community, welcome to Nordic larp! For those of you who are familiar with the community, you'll want to know that this book is a set of reprints of influential pieces from (mostly) Knutpunkt books past. Give us a few paragraphs to catch everyone else up, and we'll continue below.

If you're wondering what's going on here, let us explain. The Nordic larp, or live-action roleplaying (but it's one word now) scene started back in the 80's, but is generally considered to have started to come into its own around 1994. In larp, you usually portray a character in the same way you might in a stage play, physically acting out whatever you wish to do. Unlike a stage play, there is no script and no audience, just the setting, props, and a few details everyone has agreed on — names, relationships, and the like. Together, you and the other players explore the story you choose to tell together. Unlike more traditional "tabletop" roleplaying, you act out your role physically, doing whatever your character would do, with appropriate substitutes like latex foam boffer swords for real weapons so no one gets physically hurt.

Since 1994, the community has moved from being centered around fantasy and vampire games to addressing a wide variety of subject matter in almost every genre imaginable, from hard SF through film noir mystery, romance, what one would call modern literary fiction (were it written), and beyond. Our games have come alive as a truly collective art form, one that lets us share experiences and explore lives far beyond our own while introspecting on our deepest desires and most well-established social scripts.

The Nordic larp community differs from larp culture in other places. It spends more time telling stories that emphasize naturalistic emotion, it emphasizes collective, rather than competitive storytelling, and it takes its stories fairly seriously much of the time — far too seriously if you ask some other folks who larp in the Nordic countries. And yes, that's right, there are other kinds of larps played in Scandinavia; the Nordic larp com-

munity is a specific and by now reasonably well-defined subset. If you're curious about where the boundaries are, Jaakko Stenros's Nordic Larp Talk, *What does "Nordic Larp" Mean*, linked in a following section, will be happy to give you one perspective.

Every year since 1996, the community has organized a conference called, variously, Knutpunkt, Knudepunkt, Knutepunkt, or Solmukohta, when it's held in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, or Finland, respectively — the name means something close to "Nodal Point". Here, we come together for a few days to talk about larps past, to analyze how our medium works, to share techniques for writing and playing games, to play, to plan future games, and, along the way, to meet old friends and make new ones. It's a community that's both tight-knit and very welcoming, and if you haven't been, we encourage you to attend.

Every year at Knutpunkt, starting in 2001, one or more books has been published; we're up to eighteen now, or twenty after this year, plus several volumes published outside the conference structure and various zines, magazines, and pamphlets. At this point, this represents a mountain of material for someone new to the scene to catch up on, and the discourse of Nordic larp is bound up in all of these essays and the games they discuss. The goal of this book is to make it easier for people to get up to speed within the Nordic larp discourse, whether or not they've ever played a larp, Nordic or otherwise.

If you're new to Nordic larp entirely, we recommend starting with the video section that follows immediately after this preface and watching some of the short talks linked to there. This will give you a feel of the scope and depth of the scene more readily than just diving into the essays will, and makes for, we think, the easiest introduction. Following these pieces are three essays commissioned specifically for this book. If you're coming from outside the Nordic larp community (and especially if you're coming from outside Scandinavia and you're on your way to your first Knutpunkt or Nordic larp), we strongly recommend reading these pieces — they should help you orient yourself and better understand the community you're going to become part of. If you're already familiar with the Nordic community, you're more than welcome to read them too, of course — just know that they're almost certainly going to mostly be review for you.

After those three pieces come the reprinted texts themselves. If you're already part of the Nordic community and you just want to brush up on your theory and history, we'll see you at the *Introduction to the Essays*.

Nordic Larp Talks

Every year, starting in 2010, the Nordic larp community has gathered the night before Knutpunkt starts for an evening of short, entertaining lectures about projects and ideas from the tradition of Nordic larp. These talks are an ideal introduction to the community for outsiders, and we've provided summaries of a selection of them here. If you're new to Nordic larp and you haven't seen them before, we strongly encourage you to read the summaries below and then go watch the talks before going on to the essays. The QR code next to each still leads to the Nordic Larp Wiki page for that talk, and we've included both the wiki and Youtube addresses (as a backup) if you'd rather type them in. Enjoy!



Introduction to Nordic Larp



Sometimes going to a Nordic larp involves having a nuclear bomb dropped not very far from where you are sheltering in suburbia outside Tulsa in 1962. Sometimes it involves meeting a dragon the size of a house. This could make you think that making larps is some kind of specialized, esoteric, or at least prohibitively expensive craft, but actually it's the opposite. Our larp tradition grew and developed the way it did primarily because of how easy it is to start designing games. Since the stories in larps emerge from social interactions, making them is not fundamentally very different from things you already know how to do — like organizing a birthday party.

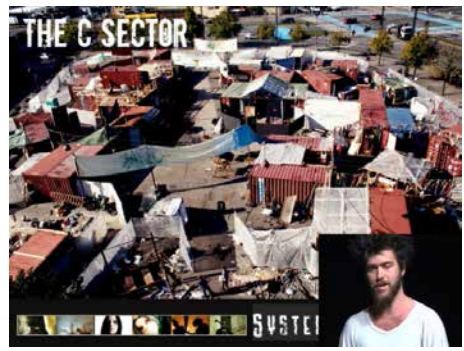
— Johanna Koljonen

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2010-1

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/fH_RLgR4DI4

Length: 20:39

Transmitting a Political Vision Through Larp



System Danmarc was a dystopian projection of tendencies in Western society pointing towards increasing opportunity gaps between income groups. Where we see an abundance of new opportunities developing in increasingly privatized utility markets, there are still few options for low income groups who are often left with expensive and time-consuming services. This was also true in *System Danmarc*.

At *System Danmarc* 350 players experienced a dystopian vision of Denmark portraying a Class C zone in Copenhagen, reserved for citizens unable to function in society. The experience was of a life without rights or security. The people in the C sector didn't live there because they were forced to do so. Rather, they lived in squalor because they had nowhere else to go as everything else was gated. Looking at the world of today, the themes of System Danmarc are still highly relevant — the gap is widening. *System Danmarc* was meant to be a blockbuster and thus featured an in-game world that was more fun to be in than the harsh political realities we wanted the players to experience. People had fun — in hindsight more fun than we would design into the larp now. However, the larp also succeeded in giving the players a tangible experience of being outside of society without hope of re-entering, in part due to the documentary produced for the ending of the larp.

— Peter Munthe-Kaas

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2010-2

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/gkR1yCiMS9k

Length: 12:11

Portraying Love and Trying New Genders



There's enough stories for at least ten hours of lectures on the topics this talk broaches. Calling it "Portraying Love and Trying New Genders" is even a bit unfair as I talk about the game (*Mellan Himmel och Hav*, Between Heaven and Sea) more than I talk about how to do just that. However, if you view it as an introduction to what enabled us to start working with portraying love, as described in *The Rules of Engagement,* or you just want to get the basic stats of the game that got it going, it's a good start. Before the other short and long talks this material leads to, on "Workshopping a Gender", "What is Fictional Love?", "Death before Dishonour - Why Killing is Easier Than Making Love in Larps", or even "How Did a Non-Queer Fiction Start a Queer-Larp Genre?" are produced, here it is.

— Emma Wieslander

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2010-3

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/2c0yFnOhQwM

Length: 8:21

High Resolution Larping



In this Nordic Larp Talk I introduce how themes like love, intimacy, and conflict can be brought into games in ways that enable "high resolution" game experiences instead of the simulation gameplay that is often used to represent these aspects of human relationships in larp. The methods used in tribal larp Totem are used as examples.

At the time of this talk, analyzing participation and larp design through looking at what social agreements, norms, tools, and game rules operate on the different role levels of person, player, and character was solidifying as one of my best design tools. I also believe it's one of the important keys to understanding the multilayered, complex dynamics of both larp and other forms of participatory works.

The longer form of the video content can be found in the article High Resolution Larping - Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond, reprinted later in this book.

— Andie Nordgren

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2010-4

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/B24dhfbFUQY

Length: 7:41

Critical Strategies of Larp



Larps generate temporary communities, portraying alternative social worlds or dwelling in existing ones. Larp lends itself to critical play precisely because it can simulate both utopian and dystopian ideals.

Nordic larp has been employed to escape, to explore, to expose, and to impose. In the talk these four approaches are fleshed out with examples to show the applicability of larp. These were later refined in the opening essay in the *Nordic Larp* book.

Larp can be used as a form of entertainment, for *escaping* the mundane, everyday existence. Larps are pretend play for adults, vacations of the mind and body, where everyday routines and responsibilities can be shed.

Play allows for failure. This makes larp a vehicle for *exploration* — especially of social rules and the underlying construction of reality. Hypothetical, fictional, and historical situations can be staged for entertainment, education, and artistic reasons.

When exploration has an agenda, it often drifts towards *exposing*. Through the first person experience larp can show what the world is like — and underline real world issues.

Finally, although larps usually influence the everyday society mostly through the experience of its players, it is also possible for a larp to impose itself on the world around them. Pervasive larps can do this by creating a dialogue with the non-diegetic world.

— Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2010-5

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/6rpim5FO-ac

Length: 18:37

On Games: Painting Life With Rules



To my own surprise, I identified a strong argument for larps being games, one not based on how the participants interact with each other but on the game design toolkit that limits this interaction.

The craft of game design is the craft of controlling and enabling actions within a structure built with rules. Game design, in other words, models the making of societies. This makes games the art form best suited to exploring questions of freedom and control.

Since giving this talk I have in my professional career looked at what the tools I first encountered in game design can do in other contexts. Today I would perhaps have added the term "experience design" as a top level category including tools to enable and limit participant agency that have been created in fields other than games — in architecture, hospitality, process facilitation, interaction design, venue management, participatory democracy, and many others. The core point about games as an art form exploring the limitations of free will remains.

— Johanna Koljonen

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2011-1

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/UOVf06NCBGQ

Length: 9:00

Fabricating Madness



This video describes the game *Delerium*, which was designed with three interwoven stories in mind:

- Internal conflict where the character's perception of reality was under attack. The characters had to succumb to the mental institution's authority and accept that their cure would start with admitting their perception of reality was wrong, creating uncertainty as to what was real in all other aspects of the narrative.
- An external conflict, framed as a revolution were the oppression of the institution created a riot. To create tension and portray the delirium of the characters the story of the revolution was cut up and played out non-chronologically. Skipping back and forth in time constantly shifted social rules from the abusive/helpful institution before the riot to the free/chaotic rules after.
- Love, to make it all matter. The characters were paired up in couples going through different stages of relationships. The otherwise nondescript institution's goal was to prepare patients to be the best possible partners when they were "cured".

Delirium was in production when "bleed" hit the Nordic scene. As everyone was trying to define what bleed was, it was natural for our production to explore the concept and push its limits.

— Peter Schønnemann Andreasen

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2011-2

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/qFRjCpsWvWE

Length: 11:22

Can Playing Games Teach Us About War?



"Nordic larp" can be described as a big picture approach to roleplaying, one that sees roleplaying as intimately connected to the real world, worth analysing, worth using to analyse the world we live in, worth taking seriously, worth experimenting with.

With this in mind, the question "What can playing games teach us about war?" cannot possibly be answered by "Nothing". After all, for more than a century the military has used roleplaying and wargaming to train soldiers and explore possible outcomes. And experimental larps, played for their own sake rather than for the sake of training or testing, explore a broader range of human activities and behaviours than strict military simulations. In this all-too-brief presentation, I've tried to cover some of the insights — philosophical, personal and political — provided by larps about war.

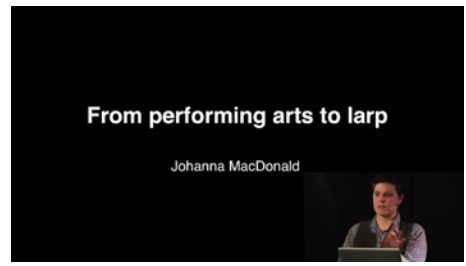
— Eirik Fatland

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2011-3

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/-SFqmzg8yWM

Length: 13:55

From Performing Arts to Larp



From Performing Arts to Larp is a short, fairly practical talk outlining some aesthetic differences between performance and participation and is primarily aimed at an art-practicing audience to give them ideas as to what they should consider when designing participatory works. My own background is in theatre, dance, and performance art, each of which has its own nuanced relationship between the performer, the work, the space it's in, and the audience. Larp uses the same elements, but with different relationships. Taking lessons from many of my own works along the border of spectatorship and participation as well as the works of others, I talk about the *aesthetics of action* — when the aesthetic value of a work is largely tied up in the experience of doing the piece, as opposed to spectator aesthetics where enjoyment and pleasure are primarily derived from receiving the audio, visual, spatial, or conceptual work of another person.

— Johanna MacDonald

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2012-1

YouTube:
http://youtu.be/TeCJX-OeJz8

Length: 16:04

What does "Nordic Larp" Mean?



The concept of "Nordic Larp" has proliferated in larp-related discussion, especially after the publication of the *Nordic Larp* book. The term remains slippery: depending on the speaker and the context it is used to mean different things.

This keynote, delivered at the *Nordic Larp Talks* 2013 in Oslo, Norway, is an attempt to understand why a such term is needed and what it most commonly refers to. The talk contains three formulations. First, there is the description of Nordic Larp, a sort of brand statement:

"A tradition that views larp as a valid form of expression, worthy of debate, analysis and continuous experimentation, which emerged around the Knutepunkt convention. It typically values thematic coherence, continuous illusion, action and immersion, while keeping the larp co-creative and its production uncommercial. Workshops and debriefs are common."

Second, there is a proposition for an actual definition: A Nordic Larp is "a larp that is influenced by the Nordic Larp tradition or contributes to the ongoing Nordic Larp discourse." This definition is appropriated from Markus Montola and Bjarke Pedersen.

Third, the talk contains a discussion around the tradition and discourse of Nordic Larp, which are the foundation and the reference point for providing meaning and context. The discourse goes on at conventions, conferences, articles, talks — and, most importantly, in the design of larps.

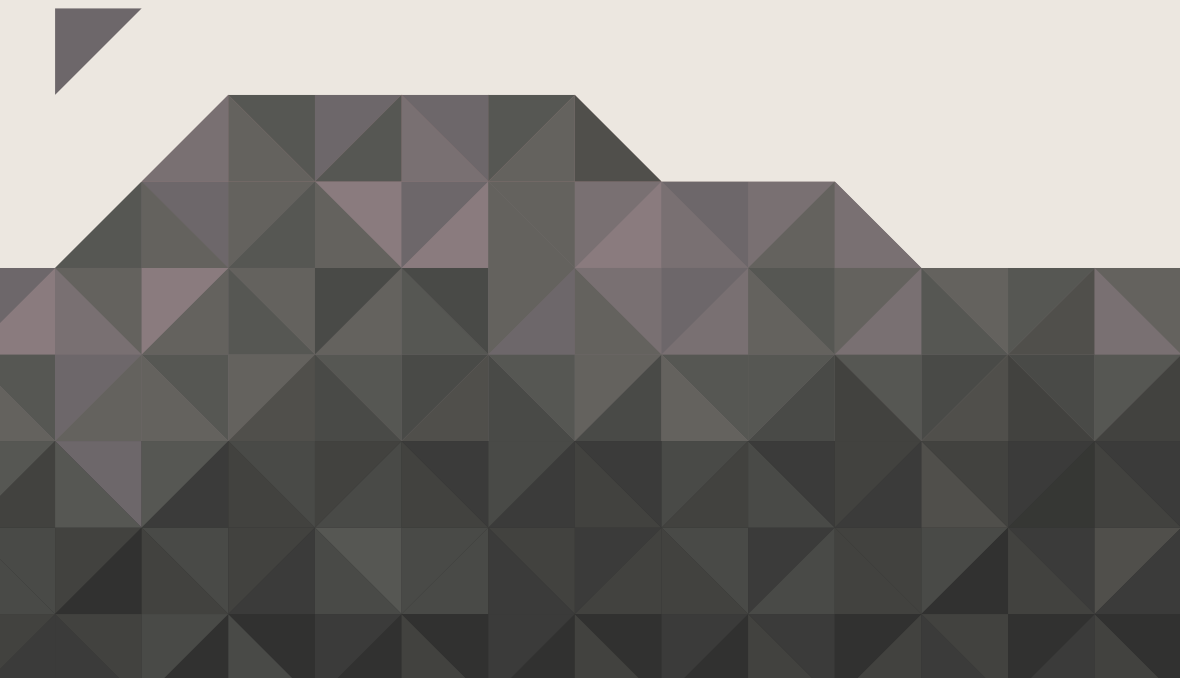
— Jaakko Stenros

Nordic Larp Talks:
http://nordiclarptalks.org/2013-1

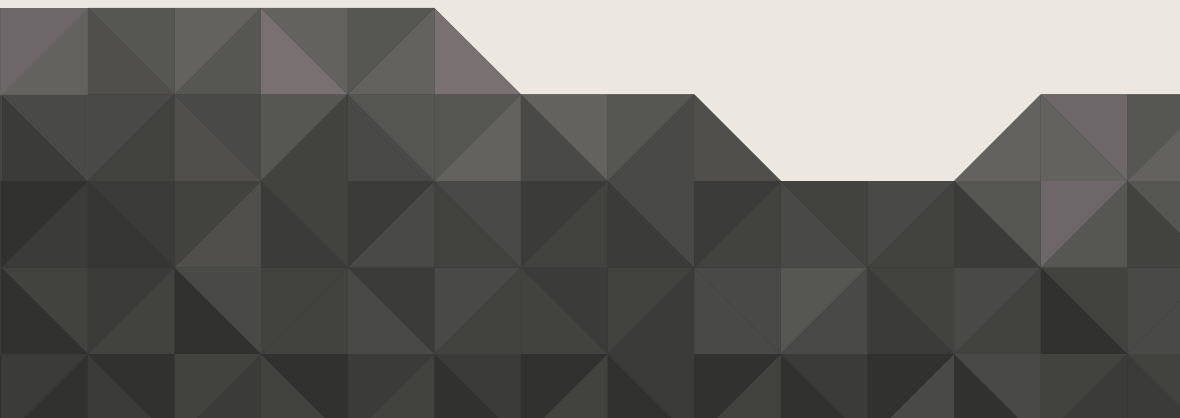
YouTube:
http://youtu.be/mL_qvBaxV5k

Length: 31:16

The Nordic Larp Community



Now that you've got a bit of an idea of what Nordic larp is, we've got a few essays here specifically prepared for folks who are coming in from outside the community that should help you orient yourself, especially if you're attending Knutpunkt for the first time this year or about to play your first Nordic game. These three essays aren't reprints — we've specifically asked the authors to write them to highlight some of the things that are special about the Nordic larp community, but which might not be obvious from the rest of the texts. The essays speak, in order, to the community, the player culture, and the Knutpunkt conference itself.



Andie Nordgren

A Community Shaped by Participation

There are a number of things inherent in larp as a medium that have shaped the community around it, but the people and social realities of the Nordic countries have shaped larp right back to form the scene and discourse that we call Nordic Larp. If you are approaching Nordic Larp from other practices such as theatre, architecture, modern art or activism, or from outside a Nordic context, I hope that the reflections that follow will help you understand some of the context of Nordic Larp and how you can participate.

Participation is Key

Larp as a medium has some properties that make it different from other forms of art. I believe that one of the strongest defining characteristics is that larp is based on the active participation of everyone taking part. Without this, the larp doesn't exist.

For the larp to come to life, every player has to use their character to play the fictional world into existence by acting as if the fictional universe is reality to the character. When all the larp participants do this collectively, the fictional world comes alive and the players can experience it through their characters. Performing this feat, in collaboration with others, is something that cannot be understood through observation from the outside. Doing it well is also a set of skills that mature with taking part in games. We learn over time to both listen to our fellow players in the joint effort to support the integrity of the fictional world, and to tune in to where a story or character arc is going. Through larp, we can explore, construct and deconstruct the human experience by inhabiting fictional realities.

Larp can be watched and documented, but participation is the only way to fully understand the very particular dynamics. This means that as a community, larpers tend to be suspicious of claims that larp is "like" this or that other medium or art form, based on what larp looks like from the outside. Common comparisons are with performance art and certain forms of theatre, and while there is plenty of inspiration and

cross-pollination from other art forms into larp, we will still claim that larp stands as an art form in its own right. We challenge you to participate first and then agree or disagree!

Nordic Collective Creation

So what is this Nordic label that has emerged for this community and particular discourse around larp? Larp culture in other places don't necessarily look much like Nordic Larp. In the Nordics, time, money and space are available to many young people, through things like public grants, laws that regulate public use of land, accessible student loans and education. This creates an environment where more people have the time and energy to be co-creators in larp, often to a higher degree than elsewhere, where larp can sometimes look more like an adventure park to visit. There is also a tradition in the Nordics to form open, democratic organizations to create and support any group activity such as larp, rather than running them through for example for-profit ventures or small elite teams of organizers.

This means we generally have the privilege of a culture of broad participation, where larps can be created that count on the ability of the participants to be strong, invested co-creators. This shapes and colors Nordic Larp, and makes the scene different from many other art scenes where a few key people produce, and the others perhaps consume, critique and purchase.

Larp organizers are still celebrated in Nordic Larp, but it is understood by all that larps are collective efforts, and that without a group of players who take up the co-creator role and fill out a larp scaffold with their participation, there is no artistic output, no larp.

You will often see clusters of people who both play and organize together - so if you want to get in touch with a certain part of Nordic Larp, you are probably better off looking for such groups of people with experience in the domain you are interested in, than trying to find single key individuals! Someone who was "just a participant" can often tell you as much about a larp as the people who organized it, a bit depending on what angle you are after of course.

This also means that people learn and form a voice in this community based on participation, co-creation and community contributions. A great way to join the swirling debates and game scene is to play a game, and thus become a co-creator. But knowledge sharing from other fields is a great path too!

Active Introspection and Development of the Form

Another result of the broad participation resulting from both the medium of larp itself and its expression in the Nordic environment, is that you have a group of people where pretty much everyone is both qualified and interested in reflecting on larp as art form and practice - and that sure leads to a lot of reflection, critique and development of the form!

The conversations that happen through games, lectures, workshops and documentation make up a discourse that evolves constantly, but also comes back to the same questions over and over, as years go by and texts, thoughts and theories are forgotten and rediscovered by new players. But each conceptual leap taken by the community can usually be traced in the games coming after it. We have had phases of pervasive larp, queer larp, "bleed" larp, of activism through larp tools. There have also been waves of laser focus and manifestos around certain aspects of larp, such as character immersion, or collective story telling. We have spent a fair amount of time and effort on trying to define and understand larp as a medium, and to define what makes it different from other art forms - and indeed arguing about whether larp is art in the first place.

Games, their documentation, and the debates that precede or follow them, form a

discourse that is almost impossible to separate from the games themselves and the community - you could view the Nordic Larp scene as a broad, diverse collective of practicing artists and DIY-academics (with some in actual academia) in constant flow between our practice and our understanding of it. And because we really believe that larp can only truly be studied as a form from the inside, this scene becomes troublesome for any too strict notions of academic knowledge production with a wish for a way to objectively observe its subject. If you are looking to study larp, be prepared to be sucked into it!

Seeing Like a Larper

While most practitioners that contribute to the Nordic Larp scene are focused on larp itself as a form, many of us use the knowledge, skills and experiences we have gained from larp in other contexts. I'd like to encourage people to view the material in this book in that light - to gain the useful viewpoints born in the larp experience, and then use them to either participate in larp or as a lens on projects or ambitions outside larp.

Larp is a design practice that constructs temporary realities for people to act in, using any reality-shaping methods available to create situations worth experiencing for the participants. It soon dawns on many that the toolbox we have for creating interesting fictional realities and things to do in them, can be applied also beyond larp.

Such a viewpoint means seeing all the layers of reality as a medium, something that can be shaped for a purpose, by the people who inhabit it. It is from this perspective that I personally hope this book can be a way for larp to meet practitioners from other fields with a wish to shape reality - to trade tools, methods and visions for possible futures - real and fictional.

— Andie Nordgren

Helene Willer Piironen & Kristoffer Thurøe

An Introduction to the Nordic Player Culture

One reason the Nordic roleplaying community is so productive in creating games, conferences, and theory is its focus on discussing and rewarding projects its members create. We talk about why a game or a theory is good, how it failed, and what we learned from it. However, we don't talk as much about how we play games, as central as it is to our community. We don't teach people how to play games and we don't write much about the characteristics of a Nordic player, even though we're aware of our own playing styles and when fellow players are handling specific game tasks in considerate or inconsiderate ways. This makes it difficult for newcomers to understand how to play Nordic larps.

Here, we've approached filling this gap as experienced analytical players, although not as scholars. We won't try to judge what good or bad roleplaying is, but rather describe how players have formed games and vice versa, how player culture is passed on, and what we perceive as its central values.

Play to Learn to Play

The most common and efficient way to learn the Nordic player culture is to play Nordic games. Both because our games are built on this tradition of play and support this play style and because in playing a Nordic game, you'll normally be surrounded by Nordic players, who enact the culture which is taught through the practice of playing. This can make it difficult to prepare for a game beforehand if you're new to the community. This is one reason why many designers incorporate pre-larp workshops before running a game. The workshops makes it possible to teach the play style and talk about do's and don'ts, while at the same time teaching players methods and tools that are a part of this specific game design.

Inside the community, there is discussion about what a good player is and who played well in specific games, but little of the for-

mer and none of the latter is written down or discussed openly — much of it could be considered gossip. As we see it, it is a way for active participants in the culture to orient themselves towards a common understanding, and a way for new participants to position their own practice relative to that understanding.

In the last few years some Nordic games have been written down and played all over the world. This has spread our player culture, but with some of the productions it became apparent that the games are not self-contained and the Nordic player culture may not be enacted if most players are non-Nordic. One example was the US run of *Mad About the Boy*, where the producers and most of the players were American. This lead to a game more focused on handling the plot and less on immersing into the drama the game produced.

> Something about the appearance of the last man read as 'weekend plot'. And as a group of American gamers, I think we fell into a familiar pattern. Our hive mind went, "Oh! A problem! We'll solve the shit out of this." And solve it we did, in under three hours.
>
> — Lizzie Stark, "Mad About the Debrief" blog post

Even though the game developed in different ways than the original productions, it was still a platform for American players to experience new game design and explore a different playing style than they were used to. Of course, none of this means that the Nordic larp culture can only exist in Nordic countries or that you can't learn to play Nordic larps if you're not from a Nordic country. Both Nordic larps and its player culture have been exported to non-Nordic countries with great success — for example, to Belarus and Palestine. This may be because neither country had a pre-existing larp community, but both have collaborated with Nordic larp organizations to import a design and play culture very similar to the one in the Nordic countries.

Not Just Players

The Nordic larp scene hasn't always been as uniform as it is today. Over the last 15 years, Knudepunkt has brought people from the Nordic countries together to exchange inspiration and discuss larps. As well as sharing and developing knowledge together, larpers from the Nordic countries became friends and started attending each other's games.

In the last five years, people in the Nordic scene have started travelling much more. It's no longer unusual to travel to other countries to play games, attend conventions and even for some people, to attend social events not directly connected to larp. This has contributed to a more regular player culture, where there used to be more difference in playing style between different Nordic countries.

In addition to travelling more, players have become more integrated socially. People don't just show up at events and games and then go home to everyday life. Larps have brought people together and created network of co-workers, friends, and romantic partners who share an interest in larp alongside everyday life. This integration means people debate and develop larps on an everyday basis — when they meet up for beer after work, attend the same parties, hang out and play boardgames, etc., because that's what brings them together.

Because of this, much of the knowledge we share is shared in a social context, either by word of mouth or by social media. It's harder to get access to and it's harder to contribute to if you aren't a part of the social community. As Nordic larp grows, however, this community is including more people both inside and outside the Nordic countries.

Many Nordic larpers are game designers, organizers, producers, and theorists, not just players. The player isn't just a passive consumer but an active part of creating games and developing the discourse. While we discuss and attempt to understand our

own play culture within the Nordic larp community, we're interested in an understanding of larping around the world too. This makes us more aware of our own position and also opens our eyes to new possibilities for where to take Nordic larp tomorrow.

Between Players and Games

The Nordic design tradition aims to create specific experiences and uses specific tools and methods to do this, all of which players have to learn to handle. However, designers are inspired by how the community play the games and what they like to play. In some ways, you can say that the player culture is what happens between players and games.

Nordic larp includes a spectrum of types of games with different influences, a large cannon, and a variety of genres. It's hard to define what defines a Nordic larp, but some traits tend to appear more often than others and these are also often what separates Nordic larps from other larp traditions. We've selected a few to highlight in this text. We know we aren't covering everything and that these selected traits aren't present in all Nordic larps. However, they illustrate how the narrative framework of a Nordic larp can look and how this influences how the games are played, and through this expose parts of Nordic player culture.

Many Nordic larps have an overlying message or theme the organizers wish to put into perspective for players. It's made clear to players at sign-up and will have influenced game design in many ways. There will also be a framing story for the players to play in together. The theme and framing story work together, but where the theme is abstract the framing story is more specific and embraces the characters. Beneath story and theme are the individual characters and their personal storylines. In Nordic larps, all three levels are intertwined. The better you are as a player at tying the different levels together, the more meaningful an experience you and those around you will get. Players often use the relations between characters to tell an interesting personal story that still ties back to the game's framing story and theme.

To connect to the theme, framing story, and personal story of their character, the players often shape their characters in a direction they can relate to. They focus on traits or problems in the character they recognize from their personal lives, or sometimes add these themselves. This is called playing "close to home", and although it isn't required, Nordic game design often supports it.

Immersion into character is another core tool for relating to the shared story, where players attempt to experience aspects of the character or its context first hand. Very few Nordic players immerse completely in their character throughout the game, and yet most Nordic games encourage some amount of immersion. Immersion and playing close to home are neither dependent on or exclusive of each other. As a player, these are tools you can use to construct the type of experience you'd like.

Two more concepts that affect the way we play in Nordic games, have grown out of the Nordic larp tradition, and are seen as iconic parts of it, are *bleed* and *playing to lose*.

Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. The experience of bleed often comes when players are playing close to home or on themes that are part of the player's everyday life, like friendship, love, or death. Bleed can make the game seem more powerful and meaningful, and therefore it's an active goal for some players.

When a player plays to lose she actively sets her character up to fail. Many Nordic games tell tragic stories, and this is part of creating that tragedy. This strategy is used by many Nordic players to create interesting conflicts and personal drama in games.

The concept is often used in opposition to a gameist player strategy where the player treats the larp as a contest that can be won through the character's achievements, often at the expense of emotional depth in the story.

Four Characteristics of a Nordic Player

So far we've looked at how the Nordic player culture is rooted in the ways it is passed on, how people in the community interact, and in the narrative frameworks of Nordic larps. From this, we see four characteristics as the basic foundation of Nordic player culture.

Co-creation

Many games have explicitly designed processes where participants take part in creating the culture, characters, relations, and storyline before and during the game. In the Nordic tradition your character's story isn't seen as belonging to you alone. You don't plan an epic story at home and go to the game to play it out. Rather, you collaborate with the organizers and co-players to tell a story that creates a meaningful experience for everyone. Many games have a large amount of transparency before and during the game to help players support the theme, framing story, and individual storylines.

Shared Responsibility

There is an unspoken understanding between the players and the organizers of shared responsibility for the overall experience. In the eyes of Nordic players, larp is an important and valuable medium and the experiences you find through it should be taken seriously. Players share the responsibility for their own stories as well the stories of those around them. It's commonly understood that if you have a bad experience you shouldn't blame the organizers or other players, but first look to yourself and ask what you can do or could have done differently. With the increasing focus on player safety, this also means that each player is expected to look after herself and her co-players before, during and after the game.

The Nordic Toolbox

Many Nordic games have developed abstract techniques and methods to express specific themes and handle specific experiences like intimacy or violence in emotional depth without violating player boundaries. There's a common understanding that these techniques are a valuable way to enhance the experience by giving players more tools to express the story and their character. Many Nordic players have a broad toolbox of these metatechniques and are capable of using them with subtlety to create a desired experience. Players are expected to be interested in this toolbox and to gain and retain familiarity with more tools as they play.

Understanding Structure

Given the complex, layered structures common in Nordic larps, players are expected to read and act on different levels at once. This being when choosing to play games that fit you as a player, and continues in both deciding which tools to use in a game at which times to create a desired effect. Reading the layers and being able to distinguish between you as a player, your character, your own personal story, the framing story, the theme, the goals of the other players, and how these different layers influence each other can be what makes or breaks your experience.

Cooking down Nordic larp player culture and trying to bottle it is not an easy task, but we hope that our analysis has given you more insight into how the community and games are structured and what this means for how we play our games. We still believe that the best way to get the full picture is to come and play our games with us. We would love that.

— Helene Willer Piironen &
Kristoffer Thurøe

Margrete Raaum

Knutepunkt — A Love Story

"I have a great idea!" He was excited. This was not an uncommon state for Erlend Eidsem Hansen, so it took some convincing to get Hanne Grasmo and myself onboard. The year was 1996 in a small office, and we were about to start working on what was to become one of the most important events in the history of Nordic larp — a conference and congress but also a festival celebrating Nordic larp in all forms. The name Knutepunkt was chosen to avoid dreary expressions like "convention" or "conference", and the hope was to create a celebration open to creative groups beyond the larp community, like movie makers, musicians, and actors.

We kept it simple. Erlend knew larpers in the other Nordic countries, and endless days of calling and connecting the larping dots in all the countries followed. As Hanne started piecing together a program, I was left with making this happen on absolutely no budget. Thank you, University of Oslo, for sponsoring larp activities for so many years.

150 eager larpers came to this first event, and the forging of new bonds between larpers from the Nordic countries was off to a flying start. Even if the event was meant to be Nordic, other nations were welcome as well, we just didn't expect them to show up. This turned out to be a prediction of the less accurate kind.

In the first year, the Knutepunkt focus was of a practical nature. People shared their knowledge on costume design, character design, and outdoor cooking. I believe there was one single talk in 1997 on "LARP theory", which is hilarious. With today's focus on theoretical aspects and applications of larp, it would be analogous to having a surgeon talking about "health and stuff".

The practical workshops of the first year quickly turned into lengthy more or less philosophical or scientific talks and discussions, which turned some participants away from Knutepunkt as they felt it had become an arena for theorists only. As a reaction to this, some organizers went back to an almost purely workshop-larp-based Knutepunkt. This ongoing change in focus does seem to have stabilized now, and the event now includes everything from hard core theory to larps and rituals.

Knutepunkt was a strange beast from the very beginning, and as the Finns showed up the very first year in their "bar van"

with a plush covered interior (I swear, it would have made any interior decorator commit suicide), we knew that there was no turning back. This also kicked off some non-productive discussions about prices in Norway, a discussion that refuses to die, along with other non-productive discussions over the strict alcohol legislation in some of the Nordic countries, etc.

Over the years Knutepunkt changed — more elements like the "Knutebook" and "week-in" were added as great supplements. The "week-in" is basically an arrangement where the local larpers open their homes (or community houses) to visiting larpers. They all larp and play and party for three days before Knutepunkt, as a warm-up for larping and playing and partying at Knutepunkt.

As Knutepunkt evolved, the "Knutepunkt insiders" could not agree on what Knutepunkt was supposed to be: A small larp convention for elite organizers? A large convention to recruit more players? An arena to present the latest academic pieces on larp? Endless hours of self-scrutiny followed. However, with the same crowd continually preoccupied with the existential issues of the nature of Knutepunkt, self-scrutiny at times reached new levels of navel gazing. Without outside perspective this discussion will always end in the same track and is no more than friendly sparring. We still don't know how to explain exactly what Knutepunkt is to outsiders.

Knutepunkt is characterized by many strong-headed people with at times extreme opinions, and this has always added liveliness to the Knutepunkt debates. The discussions have revolved around everything from character design to female organizers, "bleed" in larp, and many -isms. These debates have also revealed that the Nordic cultures are less similar than we thought, and these differences will help ensure future heated but good discussions.

How Knutepunkt became the world championship in personal expression isn't apparent. I think it's partly due to the people in the Nordic larp community. Even if we come from an expressive cultural tradition by Nordic standards, the weirdness of the Knutepunkt crowd is ridiculous — at least during the Knutepunkt weekend. There are no mundane people. It's like an energetic porcupine.

There tends to be some "scandal" at each Knutepunkt; maybe it's even a necessity — the meeting of fronts will lead to thunderstorms. The second round in Sweden has been nicknamed "ritual-gate" because the Norwegians went overboard with some rituals and full frontal nudity. They clearly won that year's visibility contest. Another scandal was an "elitist bar" that was open to only a select few attending a certain larp, the icing on the cake being that this bar did not have to respect opening hours. There was a roar of righteous resentment in the community. "Camera-gate" concerned someone bringing a camera to the sauna and filming. I'm not saying this is OK, but the scandals of Knutepunkt are often over-dramatized; I think most of the Knutepunkt community has an inner drama queen dying to come out and play. Last year's Knutepunkt saw a small prank by an innocently crazy (at least Knutepunkt crazy) young female attendee turn ugly as organizers were accused of trying to quell important debates and of condoning unacceptable opinions by hanging provocative signs everywhere. However, at least these Knutepunkts are remembered, and after a while we can all laugh and talk about "ritual-gate", "elitist-gate", "camera-gate", and "signage-gate".

Many of the regular Knutepunkt attendees have been there from the beginning, and there's warmth and a love in the Knutepunkt community that saturates the atmosphere. There are constant displays of affection; many of the attendees haven't seen each other since last year's event so the need to hug and touch is huge. This closeness and affection results in a unique intensity, so intense that everyone in the community knows the "Knutepunkt blues"

that hit you Sunday when it's all coming to an end. You're emotionally drained and you know you have to leave. It's like having a lover that you can only spend three days with a year. People start looking forward to Knutepunkt months ahead. The Knutepunkt crowd has been criticized for being exclusive, but I believe this is just because people have grown close — and in their joy of meeting once again their joy for welcoming new people into the community might not be as clearly visible.

The community is in general very open-minded, and if you're not tolerant to a diversity of sexual preferences, random nudity, binge drinking, and floating gender definitions, you may feel out of place. Be aware, however, that right-wing politics or religious proselytizing are likely to find a significantly less enthusiastic audience.

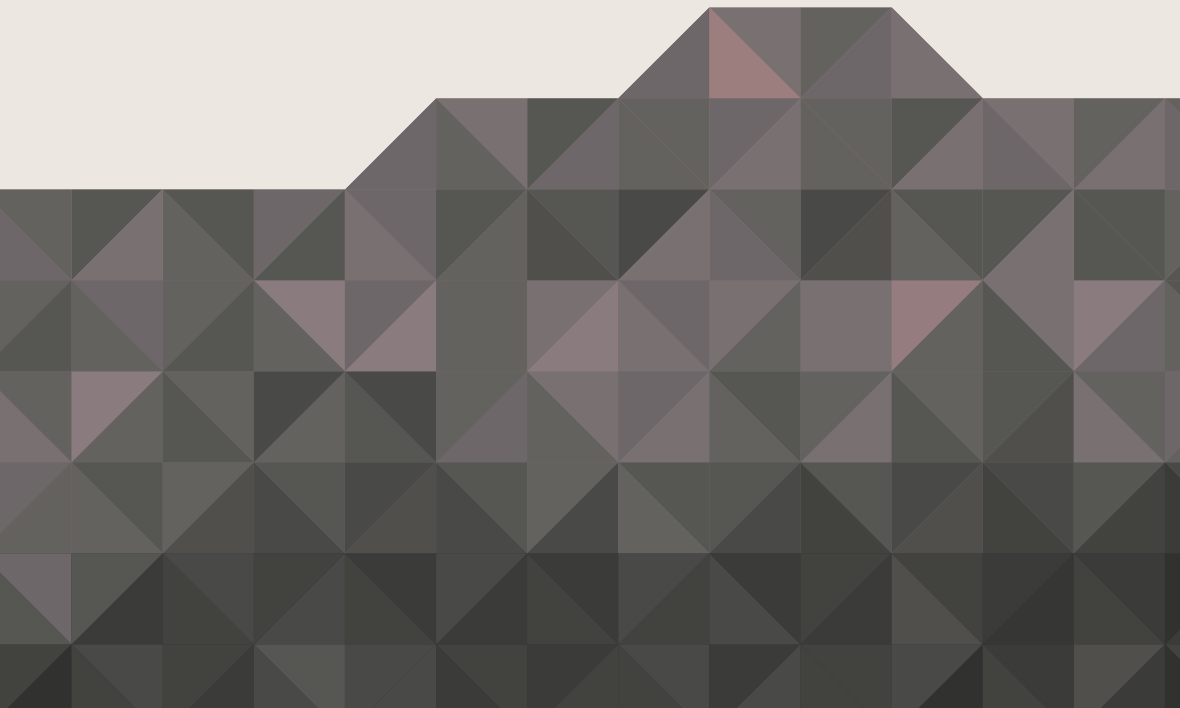
The inner workings of the event are complicated because the Knutepunkt convention "ambulates" between the Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. The organization is volatile, which makes funding difficult, and it sometimes suffers from a lack of transference of competence. This challenge is usually met with an undying enthusiasm and effort from each year's committee. Every once in a while however, the committee does not have the drive and fire needed to fuel Knutepunkt and this is clearly visible. Fortunately, this will become less and less of a problem as Knutepunkt is moving towards a stronger cross-country community effort, enabling the transfer of expertise, knowledge, and even enthusiasm and drive across the borders. This may even lead to a more homogenous format, losing some of the characteristics of the hosting country.

Knutepunkt is more popular than ever, and it now often sells out in a few hours. The community is working on being more inclusive, even creating clever mechanisms, games, and "codes of conduct" — one of the great outcomes of the above mentioned self-scrutiny. Another key goal is lowering the price of the convention itself, as the price is currently too high for some low-income larpers, and a situation where money dictated who attends Knutepunkt is wrong in so many ways.

As we move closer to Knutpunkt (Swedish spelling), I'm looking forward to meeting up with my lover of eighteen years, and even to the Sunday Knutepunkt blues.

— Margrete Raaum

Essays from the Nordic Larp Discourse



Introduction to the Essays

The definition of what is and isn't a Nordic larp is still a subject of some discussion, but the one proposed by larp academic Jaakko Stenros during the 2013 Nordic Larp Talks was "A larp that is influenced by the Nordic Larp tradition and that contributes to the ongoing Nordic Larp Discourse". This is circular, but intentionally so; both the community and the discourse are real and existing things. Hopefully, even if you're coming from entirely outside of the community you should now have something of a sense of both siad community and the tradition of Nordic larp, and now we can talk about the discourse.

In part, the discourse is defined by a set of games that are seen as being at the core of it. Membership in that set shifts over time as new games are created and celebrated and old games alternately forgotten and rediscovered. Most of us who weren't lucky enough to have played those games (and some of them are now being re-run) know them through what was written about them and the theories they tested or inspired. That writing is what we're about to see here.

The discourse is defined by a tradition of openness and participation. The community has become what it is in part because it has documented what it has done over time and actively invited others in. Indeed, we've been known to go beyond that, chasing theories down dark alleys and hitting them over the head before dragging them home. Over time, the community has had a number of conversations, all of which have left their mark and many of which are still ongoing:

- The beginning of the Nordic discourse was the so-called Age of Manifestos, around 1999, where larp designers wrote (in variously bombastic tones) what the "one true way" to build a game was. Many of these still echo in games today and they're important historical documents. That said, they're not a great place to start if you want to understand where we are now — the two manifestos we've included come at the end of the reprints.

- One of the next issues to occupy the community was the notion of immersion into a character. Many pieces included here touch on this, but Mike Pohjola's Autonomous Identities focuses on it directly.

- Pervasive games, or games that are played throughout a city or otherwise outside of a closed environment, were a specific fashion for some years and still represent a sub-genre of sorts. The essays Walking the White Road: A Trip into the Hobo Dream and especially Prosopopeia — Playing on the Edge of Reality focus on these games in particular.

- As the community welcomed more new people and got older, it became clear that if the discourse was to continue, games needed to start being documented properly and documentation for older, important games needed to be preserved or constructed. We haven't included any papers that specifically focus on this as it's mostly a concern within the practical scope of organizing games and less relevant for those trying to understand this ephemeral art. However, the excerpt reprinted from The Book of Kapo shows one of the forms this documentation is taking now.

- The notion of bleed, or when the player's emotions and life affect the character (bleed in) or the character's emotions or experiences affect the player (bleed out) became a specific thread of conversation for some time; this is covered in Markus Montola's The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Roleplaying and mentioned in several other places.

- Games that address queer issues or gender form a sub-genre of sorts within the community. Specific games mentioned here that fall into this category include Mellan Himmel och Hav, Mad About the Boy, and Just a Little Lovin', each of which is referenced in one or more papers.

- The larp community and many of the games within it are explicitly political in nature. While politics are obvious and inherent in many of the papers and games here, several papers address political issues directly, including the notion of aesthetic responsibility in larp and the use of larp as a tool for political activism and imagination.

- There are a number of near cousins to larp, including "freeform" and "jeepform" games. We've included one paper here defining the jeepform genre, but the borders are hardly cut and dry, the communities almost entirely combined, and the genres themselves are still changing with time. As especially jeepform games have become more popular, it has affected the games run within the larp community, which have begun to use more metatechniques and have become somewhat shorter.

- Larp in general and Nordic larp in particular is generally considered a safe activity, but the Nordic community works on pushing boundaries. Nordic larp has been described as a "social extreme sport", and there's an ongoing discussion on both limits and techniques for providing for player safety and care. The strongest single reference reprinted here is The Golden Rule of Larp, but we hope there will be more papers exploring this topic in the future.

The papers we have picked for this book are intended to give readers a good understanding of the scope and breadth of the discourse and to provide a solid background in those games that have had the largest impact on the development of Nordic larp. In discussion, games are often used as touchstones or as representatives of a specific theory. Having a reasonably broad understanding of what has been played is critical to a working knowledge of the discourse. For that reason, if you are new to the community and find this volume leaves you looking for more, we'd recommend that you get a copy of Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola's book *Nordic Larp*, a compendium of thirty games, including both many not mentioned here and a large number of full-color photographs (it's available in PDF from http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Nordic_Larp_Book). That said, understanding the written discourse is only half the work — to understand larp, you really must play.

Any time you go through such a large body of work and attempt to pick a handful of pieces to stand in for it, there will be things that get left out — there are a number of specific pieces that we really wish we had room for which had to be cut. Likewise, the choices we made here invariably reflect a specific view of the community and the discourse. If you disagree, please consider this only one perspective. All told, our intent is to show an outline of the form the community has taken, rather than to recognize individual papers as such.

There is one piece included here which is not a reprint, by Markus Montola. Montola has written a number of pieces addressing, among other things, the notion of diegesis in larp and what exactly it is we do when we roleplay. All of these excepting the theory chapter of his recent PhD thesis contained fragmentary, work-in-progress versions of this, and his thesis is written in a more academic tone than much of the larp discourse. To collect these ideas, which have had a significant impact on how we think about larp, and to make them available in a more accessible manner, we asked him to write the essay that became *Social Reality in Role-playing Games*.

There are two specific threads running through the discourse that we have consciously chosen not to represent here, in both cases because they require entire books on their own. First, this book represents games from the perspective of the player and theorist — there is an entire set of papers that represent the discourse from the perspective of the larp designer. Second, larp and its techniques have seen increasing use in both adult and child education contexts, to great success. We strongly encourage both larp designers and larp educators to take up the challenge and produce the respective summaries of their strands of the discourse, in part because we'd love to read them.

The texts are not presented in chronological order here, but rather in the order that we feel tells the best story for those new to the discourse. Each text is introduced by either the original author or by someone they designated, giving a sense of the context in which it was written, along with anything they might say differently if they were to write it now. The Nordic Larp Wiki (http://nordiclarp.org/wiki) is the canonical source for all of the original books, along with more information on specific games and a wide variety of other material. Between the reprinted texts and the biographies of the authors you will find links to the full contents of all of the original books.

We hope that these pieces will, in addition to providing an introduction to the discourse, demonstrate the richness, variety, and depth that the larp community has created. The discourse and the self-reflection that it inspires is one of the things that has made the Nordic larp scene what it is today. It is our hope that this volume will inspire more reflection, bring together a broader audience, and more importantly, contribute to more and better games!

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Martin Ericsson

Play to Love

Reading Victor Turner's "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; An Essay in Comparative Symbology"

Play To Love was written as a love-letter. During three frenzied nights in Umeå I tried to express why the larp community meant so damn much to me and where we could go if we just believed in its communal magic.

"We" here meant Knutepunkters in general and Adriana, the woman I had just fallen hopelessly in love with, in particular. While by no means as academically stringent as it pretends to be, it worked pretty well on both counts. Me and Addi somewhat ironically went on to explore the outer edges of the magic circle during our trans-medial and pervasive years, while the Nordic Larp scene remained intimate and full of vital liminal exploration.

My relationship to Adriana is over, but the Knutepunkt community sticks together. We are hundreds of people, bound by an endless series of rites de passage, creating wonders that the mass-medial world can only dream of. We are pretty much awesome, so perhaps it's time to change the address of our love letters, to stop sending them to each other and to start sending them to strangers. Let's grow the tribe!

— Martin Ericsson

This text is a set of extended marginal notes attempting to draw conclusions and make observations regarding some of the core aspects of live-action roleplaying from the perspective of performance studies in general and by looking at Victor Turner's (1920–1983) wild brand of cultural anthropology in particular. For many years, my mental picture of what role-playing is all about has been heavily influenced by models linking ritual behaviour, human creativity and social transformation, this is a first attempt to gather a few threads of these thoughts in writing. What I hope to gain by presenting the present musings on some interesting texts is to introduce a number of useful terms and models from performance studies that I find relevant to the study of live-action role-playing and stress the far-ranging implications of making the connections that I do. Renowned anthropologist Victor Turner's body of work spans detailed statistical analysis of marriage patterns in the villages of northwestern Zambia and ambitious attempts to find the origins of the human activities of performance and play. Moving gradually away from traditional ethnography, his later work includes the physical reenactment of ritual with student groups and of the ubiquitous performative structures of everyday western society. It is naturally these later projects that made me interested in reading his stuff. The main question Turner addresses in his study From Ritual to Theatre; The Seriousness of Human Play (Turner 1982) is how social action is related to aesthetics. He tries to explain the links between small- and large-scale social dramas (a divorce and Watergate) and aesthetic dramas found in ritual, theatre and literature. My reading will touch upon this core question, but it is not here that I find the most nutritious food for thought in relation to live action role-playing. It is exclusively the book's opening essay, Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; An Essay in Comparative Symbology (ibid, 20–60), that is the subject of this paper. If the reader finds work of Turner and the other performance theorists referred to in this text interesting, I refer them back to the original works which hold a much broader and better developed scope of ideas than those referred to here.

> A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complimentary, ethologically based behaviours which in humans continue undiminished through life; that play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms: multiple realities that are slippery porous, and full of creative lying and deceit; that play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing; that the perils of playing are often masked or disguised by saying that play is "fun", "voluntary," a "leisure activity," or "ephemeral" – when in fact the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies; that play is performative, involving players, directors, spectators and commentators in a quadrilogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has her or his own passionately pursued goals, is frequently at cross purposes. (Schechner 1993, 26–27)

Larp Theory and Performance Studies

During the last few years, larp theories have tried to define our nascent art form; the theories have attempted to create borders and definitions for what role-playing is – or in many cases, what good role-playing is. This quest for definition has thus far led to the birth of a number of strict and fairly unforgiving descriptive models, useful as tools for defining the uniqueness of role-playing in relation to other performative genres such as dance, sports, re-enactment, stage theatre and childs' play. It is tempting, but perhaps unfair, to see this struggle to find a unique and separate identity as a continuation of the role-playing community's tendency to revel in its own marginalisation. The *Dogma 99* (Fat-

land & Wingård 1999) movement actively attempts to remove influence from non-larp forms, and the Turku school (Pohjola 2003) glorifies the one trait that is seen as uniquely ours – the holy grail of immersion. It may be argued that role-playing is not performance because it lacks a conventional audience, but so do the coming of age rites of the Ndembu, the events at Tiananmen Square and chicken-races on a dark Texas highway, all of which have been subjects of performance studies.[1] New York based professor Richard Shechner, one of the giants of the field, goes as far as stating that "Everything and anything can be studied" as "a performance" (Schechner 2004).

Naturally the insights we gain from looking at larp from this angle are very different from applying something like feminist or Marxist theory, but that's a given. The fact remains that the body of larp theory has so far been largely self-referential and dominated by grand gestures and provoking poses rather than a serious attempt to make use of and comment on the large body of existing performance theory concerning play and participation on and off stage.

The practices and writings of Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski are of relevance to the role-playing community. What this boils down to is that these guys wrote some seriously provocative stuff and extended their ideas of performance far beyond the bounds of stage theatre and into the realms of religious ritual, sacred acting, childs' play and participatory drama. Had Nordic-style live-action role-playing been around in New York in the sixties, it would have been the natural focus for their studies and would have been hailed as the key, the missing link, in their quest to understand humanity's constant creation of performances. This is the greater picture in which role-playing theory is but the latest stroke of the brush, even if it has, to continue the metaphor, striking similarities to some of the very first charcoal sketches. There is a lot to learn from studying fields of performance outside the microculture of Nordic role-players and it's immediate sphere of reference.

In later years, a small number of games have consciously used some degree of understanding of performance theory as a part of the design process, the two most renowned being *Hamlet* and *Mellan himmel och hav*. The latter of these is a case of very special importance because of its effective use of methods drawn from religious performance, physical acting and writing based on solid ethnographical thinking. The game was not only something as rare as a genuine novel larp experience but also an extraordinary showcase of what can be gained from studying the roots and branches of human community, belief and performance. In games like this, role-play is getting closer and closer to something potent and primal.

The First Art?

Open almost any book on theatre history, and you'll find the romantic theory that the origins of theatrical performance lie in rituals. Most of the field still seems to support this stance, backed up by modern observations from history, anthropology and ethnography. Whether the blame for Greek tragedy is put on the ecstatic rites of Dionysus or sombre worship of dead chieftains[2] matters little. The gist is that it looks bloody likely that stage theatre arose from practices where no clear distinction can be made between performer and spectator; from processions, magic rites, feasts and initiations. One of the earliest written records of dramatic performance is a sketchy description by I-kher-nefert of his participation in the great passion play to the glory of dismembered Osiris at the cult-centre at Abydos somewhere around 1800BC. This guy was the chief treasurer of Khekure,

1 Essays on these subjects can be found in Schechner 1993.

2 As claimed in Ridgeway 1915.

the Pharaoh known to history as Senusret III. He did pretty much the kind of job a megalomaniac larp organiser would do with a few thousand slaves and unlimited resources, instead of a guy with a van and a loan from the local role-playing guild.

> I acted as beloved son of Osiris-Khentyamentiu. I embellished his great barque of eternity; I made for it a shrine which displays the beauties of Khentyamentiu, in gold, silver, lapislazuli, bronze, sesnedjem-wood and cedar[?]. I fashioned the gods in his train. I made their shrines anew. I caused the temple priesthood to do their duties, I caused them to know the custom of every day, the festival of the Head-of-the-Year. (Breasted, Henry James 1907)

From the sound of I-Kher-Nefert's report he had a busy game at the absolute centre of the plot. On his stele is written:

> I organised the going forth of Wepwawet when he proceeded to avenge his father; I drove away the rebels from the neshmet-barque; I overthrew the enemies of Osiris; I celebrated the great going forth. I followed the god at his going, and caused the ship to sail, Thoth steering the sailing. [...] I avenged Wennefer that day of the great fight; I overthrew all his enemies upon the sandbanks of Nedyt; I caused him to proceed into the great barque. It raised up his beauties, I making glad the people/tomb owners of the Eastern Desert, creating joy amongst the people/tomb owners of the Western Desert; they saw the beauties of the neshmet-barque when it touched land at Abydos, when it brought Osiris-Khentyamentiu to his palace; I followed the god to his house, I carried out his purification and extended his seat and solved the problems of his residence [...and amongst] his entourage. (ibid)

We have no real way of knowing exactly how pre-scripted these ritual plays were. Our scant sources hint that they were set up a bit like a mix between Hamlet and *Futuredrome*, with a scripted core cast at the centre of a violently ecstatic crowd. Herodotos, in his *Histories*[1], tells us most of what we know about the game at Abydos, a weeklong affair re-enacting the battle between Osiris and Seth. The Pharaoh and a statue acted as the hero-god, and it is likely that it was not seen as pretence or art when he rode his gilded divine wagon through the streets followed by thousands of common citizens who took an active part in the action as the armies and feasting worshippers of the conflicting forces. The Greek historian reports with some horror the battles were being fought on the stairs to the temple.

> The few then who have been left about the image, draw a wain with four wheels, which bears the shrine and the image that is within the shrine, and the other priests standing in the gateway try to prevent it from entering, and the men who are under a vow come to the assistance of the god and strike them, while the others defend themselves. Then there comes to be a hard fight with staves, and they break one another's heads, and I am of opinion that many even die of the wounds they receive; the Egyptians however told me that no one died. (Herodotos [2001])

The roots of the senseless boffer-war climax run deep indeed. The game must be considered quite hard core, not only for the heavy blunt-weapon fighting – the game ended with the Osiris-pharaoh slaying a live hippopotamus acting the part of Seth and a feast of hippo-cake and copious amounts of beer. The games at Abydos were not the first participatory dramas and

1 Herodotos, [2001]) Found on Project Gutenberg, see reference below.

they were not the last. Through the ages and across the globe we find similar spectacles of serious role-taking creating phenomena ranging from intimate initiatory rites to sprawling carnivals. A couple of examples that have continues into modern times would be the Waehma deerdance of the Yaqi Indians (Schechner 1993, 94–129) and the Ramlila of Ramnagar (ibid, 131–183).

The structural similarities between ritual drama and live action role-play are quite evident, even if one cannot claim an unbroken lineage of any sort – hardly a lipstick trace[1] – connecting our art causally to these dawn times of drama. Still it seems clear that current larp-practices share more traits with dramatic ritual than with any other form of human behaviour. Some of the models constructed to understand ritual and the emergence of performative art can be applicable to larps and help understand why they feel so important to players and, ultimately, why they are.

The Rites of Role-Playing

Like all tactical academics, Arnold Van Gennep went down in history by coining a phrase. The term *rites des passage* (rites of passage) is highly successful and used by academics and laymen worldwide if a bit too often. Although Van Gennep intended the term to be used for rituals accompanying both individual and larger scale social status changes as well as rites marking an agrarian society's progression through the seasons, it has come to be used almost exclusively in connection to "life crises rites" (Gennep 1909). In our industrialised western world we have pale reflections of rites des passage in our baptisms, student examinations, university initiation pranks, our marriages and burials, all rites concerned with an individuals journey from one social role to another.

Turner tries to revert to the earlier meaning in his essay; that all rites have the character of a "passage" between different conditions and asks himself what this means. My question is a bit different; I'm looking for traces of role-playing structures, similarities and hints to enrich our art. Gennep divides a rite of passage into three phases; *separation*, *transition* and *incorporation*. It is possible to follow Turner and Gennep and apply the stages of ritual on larps. In this process one finds numerous signs pointing towards the conclusion that there exists a fundamental similarity between larp and liminal rite.

Dead to the World

"The first phase of *separation*," Turner writes, "clearly demarcates sacred space and time." (Turner 1982, 24) This phase is well known and highly developed, at least in Swedish larp culture; it includes all the preparations players and organisers deem necessary to perform before they are ready to enter into a game. Most larp events are set in clearly defined spaces for a set period of time and while the game is active special rules apply within the game area. To the players, the game area is no longer a part of everyday reality, but it becomes a site hallowed to the game. Breech of this sanctity results in confusion and anger among the celebrants. To mark the space as a sacred ritual site the participants prepare buildings, paths, costumes, decorations and symbols in correspondence with symbolic world of the game. While physical separation must be considered a hallmark trait of live action role-playing, it is not the only (and perhaps not the most important) aspect of the separation-phase in a larp. Turner continues:

> It includes symbolic behaviour – especially symbols of reversal and inversion of things, relationships and

1 A term adopted from Greil Marcu's Lipstick Traces, A Secret History of the 20th Century (Harvard, Harvard University Press 1990), a work attempting to tracing the lineage of punk rock back to the situationist international, the Dadaists and beyond.

> processes secular – which represent the detachment of the ritual subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes or "initiands") from their previous social statuses. (ibid, 24)

The very act of playing a character is the most important separation made by players from their everyday social position. It is a trait that role-playing shares with many other ritual systems but this form is unique in placing at the centre of the whole experience. By putting their societal roles aside (visible through the practice of costuming, physical acting etc.) and accepting new ones the participants make ready to cross into the main part of the role-playing rite, the *liminal* or transitional phase. These preparations can be compared with the ritual washing and donning of ritual robes found in many strands of western esotericism or the elaborate costuming and mask practices of West African Yoruba-culture.

Many players find great enjoyment in this first step of the journey between worlds. The manufacture of costume, character behaviour and props of all kinds are fuelled by anticipation and charged with the will to transform. If role-players are to follow the ritual model, making the players shed their former selves along with their entire socio-moral luggage before entering the game should be the primary goal. Currently there seems to be a lot of hesitation among players and organisers about going into games naked and head over heels, yet the game will touch deeper if one gives oneself up to it completely and enters the liminoid space as a humble initiate rather than a headstrong actor.

Lurking at the Threshold

> During the intervening phase of transition, called by Gennep "marigin" or "limen" (meaning threshold in latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though these are sometimes the most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states. (Ibid, 24)

Sounds a lot like a larp. It's in liminality that Turner finds the roots to human culture and performance. This state of ritual between-ness that larpers know so well, of being "dead to the social world but alive to the asocial world" (Ibid, 27), is where elements of the culture performing the rite are mixed and mingled until it finally, after centuries, gives rise to myth, dance, play and epic. The initiates of a liminal rite are outsiders; they are compared with ghosts, gods and ancestors and often act out dramas involving these kinds of figures.

"[T]he liminal initiands are considered to be dark, invisible, like the sun or the moon in eclipse or the moon between phases[…] they are associated with such general oppositions as life and death, male and female, food and excrement, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life,[…]" (Ibid, 26) This is our spiritual heritage, and looking at the themes of a typical game, role-players seem to have adopted it just fine. The duration of a larp is a very prolonged limens-like state. Roleplayers have a lot to learn from how the tribal pioneers transported and still transport their players into the realms of human imagination. Turner's list of the defining elements found within liminality and their functions reads like a veritable checklist for larp organisers.

> […]ordeals, myths, maskings, mumming, the presentation of sacred icons to novices, secret languages, food and behavioural taboos, create a weird domain in the seclusion camp in which ordinary regularities of kinship, the residential setting, tribal law and custom are set aside, where the bizarre becomes the normal, and where through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think, and think

> hard, about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted. (Ibid, 42)

While role-players may feel pride and wonder in the connections between rite and role-play, they must still remember that the aim of a truly liminal rite is to ensure the stability and continuation of established norm patterns and to teach the initiates the mythological deep structure underlying those patterns. These are mandatory activities that must be performed by every member of society at preordained times during their life to make sure society stays the same for generation after generation. There is nothing revolutionary or romantic about limens-rites, as they are in function just tools of governmental oppression of an age before television, money and parliament. Yet, in the liminal phase of ritual, Turner (1982, 45) sees "[...] a kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments, of societal change, in a way that the central tendencies can never quite succeed in being [...]"

> The liminal phases of tribal society invert but do not usually subvert the *status quo*, the structural form, of society; reversal underlines to the members of a community that chaos is the alternative to cosmos, so they better stick to the cosmos, i.e., the traditional order of culture, though they can for a brief while have a whale of a good time being chaotic. (Ibid, 41)

This is the social function of the carnivals and feast-days found in the cyclic agrarian calendar of almost any culture as well as the initiation and growth-rites of tribal society. It is tempting to view role-playing games as this type of liminal events. Many roleplayers state that their reason for playing is to "blow off steam", to take a deep breath of magical air before they plunge back under the ice floes of the mundane. From that kind of player perspective, the game has become something akin to a medieval May fest where the poorest peasants are elevated to the top of the societal ladder for a few days before going back to the grind. This use of role-playing seems limited and wasteful. Larps are not strictly liminal phenomena despite their uncanny resemblances to these first human zones of imagination. Turner introduces the concept of *Liminoid* forms. In this term he includes all arts and entertainments that have risen from ritual liminal practices, basically meaning all of them. In stark contrast to its origin, choice, personal expression and division from the social norm are seen as the hallmarks of the liminoid arts. (Ibid, 52–55) Larp must be seen as sharing the defining traits of ritual liminality, but since it has been developed within a modern complex society it has all the freedom of expression of liminoid arts. So even if there is much to gain from treating larp like a limens-rite, to create powerful game-structures players should not be fooled into believing that the essence of live role-playing art is normative. In fact, Turner's writing implies the opposite.

Antistructure

The integration phase of Van Gennep's rites des passage model and it's relation to live action role-playing is quite tricky. Role-players are notoriously bad at letting their liminoid experiences change them, or at least admitting to being changed by them. In a tribal society there is no going back to the state you were in before the separation phase; you were a girl – now you are a woman. You will be treated as transformed by everyone in your village and you are expected to conform to the new social code of conduct – a new character in the game of the real.

Larpers have the option to let themselves be affected deeply, to use games as personal rites of passage and change, as signposts on an ever-changing journey towards death; to grab traits from the characters, learn new attitudes and ways to form social bonds. But according to Turner, it is not as isolated human beings that we have access to the true payoff of liminoid explo-

ration: rather, the benefit is to the social group bonded by the performance and, in the end, human culture as a whole. Per definition, the playful state of liminality creates a structure inverse to that of everyday reality: an antistructure as Turner calls it. Even while the liminal rites of passage strive to foster tribal citizens, they provide them with access to a field of play where the boundaries of normal behaviour and thinking are extended or even dissolved. The threshold stage, especially when prolonged into a "[...]'tunnel' where the liminal becomes the 'cunicular'[...]" (Ibid, 41) becomes a repository for ground-breaking ideas and methods of organization. Turner quotes anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith's definition of his own term.

> The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the "antistructure" represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it. We might more correctly call this second system the *protostructural* system (he says) because it is the precursor of innovative normative forms. It is the source of new culture. (Ibid, 28)

Comparing this with the Marxist "superstructure", the lump of non-essential culture that is generated by the fundamental means of production and ownership, yields a heretically simple explanation. Where Marx sees all social change as coming from changes in the modes of production, Turner sees societal development as a continuous interplay between structure and "antistructure"; the child of liminality – the product of role-playing.

> Antistructure, in fact, can generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behaviour of those in mainstream social and political roles (weather authoritative or dependent, in control or rebelling against it) in the direction of radical change, just as much as they can serve as instruments of political control. (Ibid, 33)

For what is live action role-playing if not a constant construction of alternative structures of being alive as a humanoid creature? While inside a game, role-players relate to each other in manners completely different from their everyday state – and not just due to the obvious change of character enacted. Participants are required to leave the whole social role complex they consider to be their "selves" at the door and enter into alien mental and relational configurations, adopting cultures often opposed or vastly different to their own in terms of value-systems and structural composition. But far more important than in-game changes of social structure, that often are not that impressive, is that they are required to change their primary role to that of player and co-creator, a task that requires every ounce of concentration and skill they can muster. The ideal player must become a *Liminaut* – a free explorer of the threshold realm – and abandon all illusions of being an individual defined by the fetters of her mundane prison of self. The equation is as simple as it is potent: *to truly play one must be truly free.*

Communitas

> I have used the term "anti-structure," (sic) mainly with reference to tribal and agrarian societies, to describe both liminality and what I have called "communitas." I mean by it not a structural reversal, a mirror imaging of "profane" workday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy-rejection of structural "necessities," but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. , from the normative constraints incumberent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as family, lineage, clan, nation, etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive so-

> cial category such as class, caste, sex or age division. (Ibid, 44)

Here Turner approaches his most important, and from the role-playing point of view, his most stunning conclusion. Liminality ultimately requires it's participants to meet each other on a being-level free from the ego-mongering and constant role-playing of society; be it the capitalist cycle of hard work and guilty leisure or the never-changing agrarian cycle of harvest and planting. Communitas is the experience of moving beyond and outside our prison-selves, of choosing to believe in a dream together, and in doing so suddenly seeing each other not as targets of transactions to benefit our own ambitions, but as a part of an *Essential We*, as parts of a communitas. Turner writes:

> What then *is* communitas? Has it any base or is it a persistent fantasy of mankind, a sort of collective return to the womb? I have described this way by which persons see, understand, and act towards one another (in The Ritual Process) as essentially "an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals." (Ibid, 45)

This is the hard-caught experience that makes role-players return to the forests and cellars of larpdom year after year. Immersion is but one of the tools to reach it – it is the individual's way to approach this collective state of grace, but it is an empty sacrament without the company of other celebrants. Turner finds his word for immersion in "flow", a term for a state of untroubled creative mind that comes from mastering an activity within a set framework (acting in character, for instance), coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.[1]

> "Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement," and is "a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic wich seems to need no conscious intervention on our part…we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future". (Ibid, 55–56)

One of the key effects of "flow" states is a pleasurable sense of "loss of self". This may hold the key to what character immersion really is in psychological terms, but it should be the subject for future explorations and should not distract us from the wonder of communitas.

> Again, "flow" is experienced within an individual, whereas communitas at its inception is evidently between or among individuals – it is what all of us believe we share and its outputs emerge from dialogue, using both words and non-verbal means of communication, such as understanding smiles, jerks of the head, and so on. (Ibid, 58)

So where can we find communitas in the order of modern society? Where are the places were we may create "[…]an interval, however brief, of *marigin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance." (Ibid, 44)

Performance began as mandatory participation and live-action for the good of the community but it has turned into the highly personalised business of art and entertainment to be bought with money and leisure time. Turner views this shift from *Liminal* to *Liminoid* mainly as a process of liberation and diversification (Ibid, 52–55), but there is also a fundamental shift in

1 Quoted extensively by Turner, reference to original work (Csikszentmihalyi 1974) found below.

the relationship between the role of audience. Turner does not focus his attention on this area specifically, but it is telling that he considers ritual liminality to be the primal and perhaps most effective way of creating communitas, while the liminoid diversions of modern times offer a wider range of choice.

> In tribal societies and other pre-industrial social formations, liminality provides a propitious setting for the development of these direct, immediate, and total confrontations of human identities. In industrialised societies, it is within leisure, and sometimes aided by the projections of art that this way of experiencing one's fellows can be portrayed, grasped, and sometimes realised. (Ibid, 46)

Larp, as stated before, shares the traits of liminal and liminoid. Participation and co-creation are the bridge between the intensity of grand ritual drama and the freedom of modern art. Others have started down this path before, the "environmental theatre" of Richard Schechner and Grotowski's "paratheatre" both explored ritual, participation and quested communitas. When he left the stage to pursue the project that later became known as *Holiday*, Jerzy Grotowski made this statement at a conference in New York;

> Am I talking about a way of life, a kind of existence, rather than about theatre? Whithout a doubt. I think at this point we are faced with a choice...The quest for what is most essential in life. Different names have been invented for it; in the past these names usually had a religious sound. (Schechner, Wolford 1997, 232)

But this quest for a form where "the terms "spectator" and "actor" lose their divisive significance and both the action and the creation become a collective responsibility" (ibid, 232) was met with massive critique and lack of understanding from a theatre world that needed to see how the Polish directors' methods could be applied to the stage (ibid, 5). The heritage of Grotowski lives on, but it is almost invisible in the shadow of the mainstream. Schechner gradually tempered and finally gave up his experiments in participatory theatre because he concluded it destroyed the aesthetic value of his work (Schechner 1973, 40–86). The fire of communitas in performing arts died down to a flickering ember. But it was only waiting, biding it's time to flare up in the most unlikely of places.

Play to Love

> Here we have a loving union of the structurally damned pronouncing judgment on normative structure and providing alternative models for structure. (Turner 1982, 51)

Who today can claim to be the initiated masters of the threshold realm, priestesses of the cunicular realms of phantasmagoria and poets of heart-to-heart? Who today can compare to the thousands of fanatical role-players as they wield the first art of man in ways never before dreamed of? We discovered it, almost as if by accident with our childhood friends, drawing labyrinths in pen and paper, conjuring it in our long-grunning table-top campaigns and in the furious invention of radical freeform, we feel it when the vision is strong and shared, when the village sleeps and breathes at night, as tears flow and the undiscovered country of the future is in our collective hands. We set our souls aflame with it when trembling fingers touch and the black eyes facing us do not reflect but truly see and feel. This is inter-immersion, this is Genesis, this is the fire of communitas and it is as old as mankind itself.

> Liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm. In either case it raises basic problems for social structural man, invites him to speculation and criticism. But where it is socially positive it presents, directly or by implication, a model of human society as a homogenous, unstructured communitas, whose boundaries are ideally

> coterminous with those of the human species. When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one. (Ibid, 47)

There we have it. Through the game of love and the love of the game, we have discovered that the structure that binds us is just another set of rules, as false and as real as the ones we create for pleasure. Performance theorists have stated this for a long time, but we active larpers have never been good at taking ourselves or the implications of our art seriously. Turner's model of communitas gives us a tool and a positive vision to strive for rather than the general sense of doing something that feels important.

Within our liminoid games, we are starting to discover ways of acting and being together that are ultimately more human and humane than the order that surrounds us. Play itself is becoming a valid ideology as a vision of constantly renewable co-creation of meaning is emerging. I can't help feeling something big is about to happen. I hear it whispered at conventions, see it embedded in the structures and stories of our games, hinted to on discussion-boards, and witness it confessed in the slow grey hours when one game has ended and another one has yet to begin.

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Tova Gerge

Temporary Utopias

The Political Reality of Fiction

I wrote this article ten years ago, when I had just started to ask my first serious questions about the difference between larp and reality. The questions were connected to my experiences around the larp Mellan himmel och hav *(2003), where different layers of social codes collided in ways that I was all but prepared for.*

I think of the article as an honest attempt to articulate this swarm of questions and find a language for what I had experienced. If I could rewrite it today, I would apply this language differently in many cases. For example, I disagree with how I start off using the term "political" to describe primarily scenarios that are framing themselves as such — nowadays, I prefer thinking of everything as political, not least the things that insist that they are not.

The questions about how social power structures intersect with the vulnerability of the embodied identity still feel very urgent to me. Actually, I was a bit surprised to find them laid out so clearly already so long ago, or a bit annoyed with having worked with them for so long without having solved them — but then again, who did?

— Tova Gerge

The participants of the Swedish larp Mellan himmel och hav (Between Heaven and Sea) spent months in preparation for exploring subjects such as silence, love, friendship and empathy in a society far away from earth as well as modern and post-modern society. This contrasts greatly to the worlds of oppression and revolution that larps such as the post-apocalyptic, party-revolutionary Futuredrome *or the commonplace fantasy-scenarios have presented the last few years. This article uses the larp Mellan himmel och hav to look at how themes and dramatic structures correspond with political focus.*

Mellan himmel och hav was a larp for approximately 70 participants. The preparations included three mandatory weekend-long workshops focusing on building an ensemble and mediating the artistic vision. For the actual three days of the game, Riksteatern (Sweden's Nationwide Theatre) put one of their black-box stages in Stockholm at the disposal of the project.

The fictive place of the game was a small biosphere in a world distantly related to ours. The people of this world had advanced technology that worked, but they had mostly forgotten how it worked. They travelled in space but had extremely strict religious ideas on the cosmic balance of the elements in the universal processes. The moon, the sun, the heaven, the sea and the land all corresponded to aspects of human relations. Although direct violence and other methods of gaining power were taboo, essentialism and outspoken hierarchies permeated the society. All families had their special functions, and all the functions had various cultural features and social restrictions. The fictive time did not correspond with the standard 24 hour-periods, instead, the diurnal cycle lasted 18 hours, so that three days became four.

The essential categories of normal social identity were the Morning people and the Evening people; groups that organised the lives of the characters like male and female roles do in our society. The cultural attitudes were more dogmatic, however – queer theory was an impossible thought in this world. The traits of these groups were not translatable into terms of female and male. In short, Morning people woke up early in the morning, had the power over the private space and were the sensual subjects, while Evening people liked to be awake at night, had the power over the public space and the language, but were the objects of sensuality. Sensual desire was reorganised so that the Morning people and the Evening people desired each other, while biological sex was a relevant factor only concerning reproduction. All gendered pronouns had therefore been replaced with new words. The sensuality in this society was not monogamous, or even restricted to the four-person-marriages. But on the other hand, one married into a family and was bound for the rest of her life and death, which meant the relations between the spouses were really important. Marriages were planned and discussed every waking hour – making four people match is not an easy thing.

In the diegetic culture, the individual received respect and love through accepting and acting in line with the role the society had distributed. Two social groups had the freedom and responsibility to move outside the norms. The first group, Sunnivas, was a mixture of children, walking psychiatrists and the clergy, functioning as a valve for forbidden emotions by playing with people and listening to them. The second group, the dead, escaped the society's pressure by choosing cultural death. The culturally dead of this world were freed from the daily responsibilities (such as cooking or cleaning), but had a duty to watch over the social processes and intervene if they took a bad turn. Being dead also meant only being able to communicate directly with other dead people or Sunnivas, as paying attention to the dead was a taboo.

The centre of the story was a marriage between four young people, three of them leaving their families, all of them leaving their childhood. It was a controversial mar-

riage in the sense that the spouses came from different classes: One of the spouses came from the seventh house (low social standing), while the others came from the third house and the second house (high social standing). The fear of the marriage being a disaster and the sadness of leaving the dearest ones were mixed with high hopes for the future. Mellan himmel och hav told the story of love across the borders in the hour of parting, about new friends and the slow transforming of traditions. Simultaneously, it transformed a piece of the world; three or four days of 70 people's lives.

Political Symbols

"Political larping" is not a self-evident set of words in Sweden. According to Jonas Nelson's (1996) text *Projekt H – historien of lajv*, Swedish larping had its origin in war games, didactic scout-plays and parties inspired by the Middle Ages. Organisers have started to organise events with an open political agenda only quite recently. Mellan himmel och hav is one of these larps. Starting with the three workshops that were held before the game to sum up the basics in feministic identity discourse, the event marked all information directed to players as ideological.

Outspoken ideology seldom builds an entire game. Lights, music, stage design and poetry were all a part of Mellan himmel och hav. The fact that the language lacked male and female pronouns gendered pronouns had the visible effect that other aspects of personality became more important. The consequences of other changes are more difficult to evaluate. The creation of this fictive world included linguistic and spatial changes that were related to the perception of death, birth, sexuality, economics, history, place, space and time. Symbols such as white walls, strange food or an 18-hour diurnal cycle were used to create a certain atmosphere.

Symbols interact and create meaning, but in a larp, it is impossible to foresee exactly what meaning, since symbols do not only interact with each other, but also with the players. Yet, games that have a conscious agenda and aim for conscious change are considered more political than others[1] But through the interaction of symbols, new meanings and hidden political messages emerge – with other words, a scenario with the most apolitical intentions could turn into propaganda. Larp as a form has an aspect of secrecy and unpredictability to it that makes it possible to interpret any role-playing event as antisocial.[2] Secret places and conversations are forbidden in the age of reality-soaps and documentary entertainment; that is why media loves to portray role-players as scary or threatening to society. But what happens when the game ends? Are role-players still a part of an anti-social movement? According to an essentialist view of identity, they are – once an identity thief, always an identity thief, just a well-hidden and well-integrated thief.

Broken Hallelujah

In the case of Mellan himmel och hav, the ideological consequences for the participants of the larp greatly varied, but the issue of gender, that was so much a topic during the preparations, was not a focus of great interest after the larp finished. Instead, another discussion emerged: Whether political isolationism or political

1 The meaning of conscious is here intentional, not some vague opposite of unconscious. It is possible to mess with behaviour and reality perception without actually intending to, but that is not exactly the same thing as being conscious. I do not think that the effect of a rebellious act against any given system is proportional to how fucked up one is while performing it. It is only a question of how the individual relates to the norm of the given system.

2 "Antisocial" as it is used in Fahrenheit 451 (Bradbury 1953). Against society, something subversive.

confrontation is the most effective tool in the ambition to utopia. The partly utopian, partly strictly traditional society portrayed in the game obviously created a strong isolationist or even sectarian will.[1]

Often, larpers are left without any method of completing their characters' stories. Larps do not have a Hollywood ending with punishment or enlightenment; they just end, in the middle of something or nothing. With an outspoken message, the dramatic structure tends to look more like a classic orgasmic peak, if not on a personal level, then at least in the very centre of the story. The public (diegetic) protests by the 1000 characters living in the post-apocalyptic brave new world of consumption in Futuredrome, grew every day of the game, to finally explode and the social structure. The orgasm/revolution re-established the new age subject-centred anarchistic order that was the ideological base of the story.

Mellan himmel och hav could possibly be considered to have an orgasmic structure, too. All the other stories were built around the frame of wedding, one of the ceremonies marking a happy, ideologically normalising end in the Hollywood tradition. But in the case of Mellan himmel och hav the wedding was not at all romantically ideal, neither was it a miserable mistake. The order established through the ceremony was the order of an oppressive society, far from a traditionally correct wedding with a happy bride and a happy groom. No death, no victory, no Aristotelian catharsis – a really strange orgasm for a group used to Christianity's dualistic view of the world. Less strange is that the wish for a happy ending – or just any ending – combined with a group identification built on mutual strong experience, leads to sectarian dreams. Social bondage then becomes the reason to continue the anti-social line of thinking.

Immersive Storytelling

Larp manifestos over the years have presented different ways of creating and experiencing games. Pohjola (2002) refers to two of the more known normative larp manifestos, Finnish Turku-school and Norwegian *Dogma 99*: "For Dogmatists the interaction, what happens during the game, is 'the reality of the LARP.' For Turkuists, that reality exists only inside the head of each player". *The Manifest Sunday* from Sweden has yet another view on what is important in a larp. "LARP is collective storytelling. Storytelling happens through interaction between participants"(Boss et al. 2001). Depending on whether an organiser chooses to focus on the mental processes of the player, the interaction between the characters or the interaction between the players, the methods used to create drama will differ. Sometimes, a cigar might be a wand (how Freudian), or a player may be an archetype in the subconscious mind of the one and only character (how Jungian). Mellan himmel och hav did not take a definite position in this discussion; neither did the players have a unified way of seeing it.

Bertolt Brecht, the director and playwright who wanted to alienate his spectators and actors from strong identification with the characters (Brecht 1966, 49), is an interesting person in this context. He was not too fond of the Aristotelian drama, but instead he argued that distance is necessary to remain politically and intellectually "free" in relationship to the artistic work (Brecht 1966, 32). To be able to see the construct of fiction, he also said, the spectator or actor need to be moved out of the condition of identification. It is very difficult to move a person who never identified with the play and the characters in the first place, out of the identification. "The events must not imperceptibly follow upon each other, but one must be able to get in between with the opinion" [my translation], he writes (Brecht 1966, 45).

1 One of the participants is seriously thinking about buying a big farm in the countryside and settling there to create some sort of utopian zone.



(Photo: Sofia Nordin)

This means that the awareness of illusion occurs when one is pulled into and out of illusion. In that sense, Mellan himmel och hav was a Brechtian larp. The constantly present music changed from being a part of the fiction with sounds of waves from the sea, to being more like film music for interaction, useful for enhancing or projecting feelings. The fact that the fictional biosphere was placed in a black box at one of the biggest Swedish drama institutions also gave a taste of Brecthian aesthetics. Staging a society on an actual stage is a rare thing to do for a larper, and the difference always creates a certain level of consciousness. Yet another thing that made Mellan himmel och hav a structurally less Aristotelian larp was the group playing dead people. They were not seen by the other characters (though maybe discreetly noticed), but functioned in a way as directors with the possibility to send subtle signals or outspoken wishes considering the development of the game or, from a character point of view, the future. But players could ignore them and characters could choose to rebel against their whispers – the space of action was still technically wide open.

A Therapeutic Dilemma

Unlike Brecht's ensemble, larpers are not giving life to the world and vision of a director, but to their own world built on human meetings. In exchange for this freedom, they do not have the possibility to redo a show. Organising a game consists largely of guessing what input will give what outcome. There was a general agreement articulated during the preceding workshops to avoid melancholy and search for joyful presence – positive power drama (see Wieslander 2004) instead of Oedipal patriarchy and heaps of dead fathers. No Aristotle, no cry; that was the deal. Still, halfway through the game, people were drowning in tears. Diegetic farewells turned into black holes of abandonment. Families quarrelled; lovers turned the back on each other, deadly illnesses occurred out of nowhere. As for the people behind the characters, several groups and individuals were so sad and shaken by what was happening to the characters, and by the non-fictional questions these events raised, that they found it necessary to cut the game to be able to fight against the spreading sorrow.

One of the reasons why this development occurred is simple and structural: It is hard to be really happy in a society oppressing its inhabitants. Own choices may be just as terrible as the choices others make you, but this world was not the place for choosing much at all. It was built on arranged marriages, systematically broken families and a strict class and gender system. On top of that, the characters were expected to feel, or at least act, happy. Since it was possible to hear everything the neighbours were whispering, conflicts were not solved easily, but became just as time-consuming and slow as love or any other feeling. In the silence, it was possible to hear minds move. The time before the game that was spent on building an ensemble that listened to each other, made feelings contagious and radiant, no matter what these feelings were. My conclusion is that it is easier to make larping positive with structures that are predominantly positive for the individuals of the fictional group.

Another aspect of the problem is more fundamental. Before the game the players agreed that love would be the core theme of the game. But love is a gigantic word and it includes some really nasty addictive, destructive behaviour –limitless, symbiotic love may be twice as lonely as being alone. The agreement said everyone would give everything they had and give it honestly. But receiving may be just as hard as giving. Every human being has had to face rejection, and some people have hardly done anything else.[1] Once paranoid, or unprepared, or just a little shaky, the dream of meeting on common ground may turn into mutual emotional disaster. And then, all love in the world cannot fix what has already been broken a long time ago.

The agreement of honest affection means stripping down to the core, where love and disaster lie entangled. The author who inspired the fiction of Mellan himmel och hav, Ursula K. Le Guin, has written many stories about giving name to disaster. In *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) the young boy Ged travels around the world being chased by his shadow. In *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) a psychiatrist unleashes hell as he tries to create world peace. Despite this, in the long preparation period of this project, the potential abysses of human interaction were never up for discussion. This meant that Mellan himmel och hav moved on a risky psychological level. People were free-falling into despair, not just in character, but in all kinds of ways. And there were not people enough to catch them, at least not while the game was still going.

In Sweden, there is no tradition of bringing in any other social support in the off-game area than the organisers. With the amount of mental breakthroughs this scenario raised, some peaceful Zen masters without any personal attachment to the creation maybe would have been useful. I want to believe that if there had been a vivid conversation around how to relate to old and new pain earlier on in the process, the risks would not have been so great. But it is also possible that the opposite is true – the more safety net, the more awareness of the therapeutic aspect of larp – the greater the number of people allowing themselves to feel things that are forbidden in everyday life. The question then is if it is possible or even desirable to avoid moving in the therapeutic area of human emotions when larping. And that in turn depends on political goals and tools.

Personal Politics

Mellan himmel och hav is an example of a larp with a strong political agenda, but defining identity as the battle arena rather than society. While feminists in the 60's looked on personal relationships and pointed out behaviour in private space as a consequence of society, Mellan himmel och hav invented a set of new identities and hoped it would echo into reality. Concrete poetry tried to distort the way language

1 Break another little piece of my heart now, baby – just because it makes you feel good.

control our perception. Many other different art forms have tried to change or renew the tools of building identity. Larps, unlike books or films with this theme, have the possibility to play in first person with the very symbols that sum up identity. In that sense, the very theme of the larp medium is post-essential interaction between liquid egos. To put that theme in focus for a larp means stretching the identity shift outside the explicit gaming time and area.

Mellan himmel och hav did this in both chronological directions. Months of intellectual and physical, rather than just practical[1], preparation became new months of discussions, evaluations and personal crises after the actual gaming experience had ended. This is a good example of the development political larping has taken in the past few years. Role-players are slowly deconstructing the wall between reality and game, letting larp become "radiant" instead of a closed space for play (no matter if that play is political or escapistic). The revolutionary satisfaction[2] or the ideological hopelessness we often find in a game with a specific political agenda woven into the *story* differs greatly from a process that begins and continues *outside* the space of the story. There is no strict line between these fields, but Mellan himmel och hav definitely falls into the second category.

To define larping as a possible threat to firm identity equally means that society will view larp as threatening. To me, that is not the greatest problem. Instead, I worry about how role-players deal with the authoritarian networks they manage to build among themselves when becoming collective and process-oriented. It is easy to agree or disagree with a message that is mainly intellectually told in all its interactivity; you come, you leave, you analyse alone, no matter if the dramatic structure is Brechtian or Aristotelian. But when the ideology becomes bodily experience or social relations, the obstruction to whatever the message is becomes more complicated. Where does ideology begin and where does identity end? I believe that what we chose to answer to that question is decisive for how future radical larping will look.

Games

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1 Practical vs. intellectual/physical as in sitting alone sewing an extremely advanced costume vs. doing improvised dancing and drama exercises together in a black box.

2 "Wow, we managed to create democracy out of dictatorship again!"

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Johanna Koljonen

"I Could a Tale Unfold Whose Lightest Word Would Harrow up Thy Soul"

Lessons from Hamlet

This essay is where I first approached two ideas that would become important to me — what I'd later call the "360° illusion" and larp as an ephemeral art form. Its main point is validated in the re-reading — in the decade since I had forgotten many of the things I had written down and, presumably, most of what I didn't document. That the game resonated strongly with the war in Afghanistan, for instance, had slipped away entirely from my recollections of this Hamlet*, although it was obviously of great importance at the time.*

Especially in the run-up to the game, Hamlet *was communicated as something lavish and entertaining, a natural successor to the Hollywood-style action of Carolus Rex. What stands out today is my astonishment that something this much fun could also be this meaningful, this horrifying. Today we would expect just that of a game this ambitious.*

I contributed a few character descriptions to Hamlet*, but didn't and don't consider myself one of its creators. I NPC'd as Ophelia in the first run and played the Secretary of War in the second. The dramatic, florid style of the text attempted to communicate the atmosphere of the game.*

— Johanna Koljonen

In the spring of 2002, larpwrights Martin Ericsson and Christopher Sandberg and their team produced the last three acts of William Shakespeare's Hamlet as a three-day larp in Stockholm. The game was massive, intense, beautiful, tragic, life-changing. It is, even today, a top contender for the greatest larp of all time. Yet, we are losing Hamlet. The evanescence of the art form is furthered in this case by the vow of silence taken by the players: that they would only discuss the game in detail with other participants of the game. Actually, although we who were there tended to seek each other's company over the following summer, we did not speak much about the game. I think we were in grief, over mankind, over the court at Elsinore, over a world that was now lost to us.

At a lecture at the Ropecon convention, Ericsson spoke of larp as alchemy, as the process of turning crude matter into gold within a hermetically sealed space. This idea is bound to make practitioners of both role-playing games and magic intensely uncomfortable. But think of it as an allegory: the practical implications are down-to-earth and useful. This Hamlet set of methods is what I will describe, reducing out of necessity a great artwork to rules and logistics. It doesn't do the game justice, but it's a sort of legacy, I guess, to deepen the magical daydreams of others.

There Was Elsinore

The organisers' political reading of the tragedy, though not in vogue today, is in the respectable tradition of Marxist literary criticism. To emphasise the political aspects, the action of the Shakespeare play was moved from one fictive historical setting to another. They imagined a Europe where the bourgeois French Revolution was unsuccessful and the twentieth century was met by a world of industrialised feudal societies. The socialist revolution would then have been aimed at monarchies and at the nobility controlling much of the industries. The game was set in a parallel thirties, during the Spanish civil war and an escalating armed conflict between red Fortinbras and the Danish Empire. The echoes of the Russian revolutions 1905–1917 are obvious, but many of the issues concerning the use and transfer of power are probably universal. Today we might have thought of other conflicts; at that time we found decisions of the desperate Elsinore government to strangely mirror the war in Afghanistan and the new changes to the makeup of American society.

Everybody knows about Hamlet's question: to be or not, to live or not, to end it all or stay on and fight? In the play, this question is intimately related to the idea of the body politic, the concept of an unsuitable head of state being like a cancer in the body of the nation. Shakespeare emphasises this in the text through dozens of images related to illness and at the end of the play it is made quite clear that the reason everyone has to die is to quell the corruption and make way for new, and saner rule under Fortinbras.

The end of the game was given, of course, although not everybody expected Fortinbras to charge in that impressively, guns blazing, with a war-torn band of rebels and red flags. The dramatic tension was constructed instead around Hamlet's question, which was put to every player about every character. As the game begins, the court and a random assortment of citizens have been evacuated from the castle to the bomb shelter below. Not all of them are bad, but none of them are innocent, and the weeks in the cave until the end are spent in debauchery and denial. Now, many would be killed during the second and third act through acts of treachery or desperation, but for those who were still alive at the end, Ericsson and Sandberg left a decision to make. When Fortinbras enters, they said, he will fire at the crowd, and your character will die unless you believe he really deserves to live.

And so depressing was this portrait of humanity that very few remained. The game was played twice; only a scattered handful

of characters survived. Maybe eight, maybe five out of seventy or eighty. We did not feel at the beginning that our characters were all that evil and they did not, of course, even believe their lives were threatened until they sometime in the second act could hear the riots in the streets above them. But over these few days, a couple of weeks in game-time, we players became convinced that our characters were selfish, brutal, inhumane. That the war waged by the government, sequestered with us, was utterly unjust.

We signed up for Hamlet because Ericsson and Sandberg are great entertainers, because they had promised that there would be a fantastic party and that this larp would push every imaginable limit of the art form. They are. There was. We did. But when we left the game, we were grieving, and thinking of it makes my heart ache still.

A Sealed and Complete Space

The tabletop game master, in theory, has complete control of the in-game reality (but he can choose to cede some of this power to the players). Although every player's mental imagery will of course differ, the constant presence of a game master can control discrepancies before they become conflicting enough to threaten diegetic logic. In a larp the game master typically gives almost all control over physical reality to the players at the start of the game. Illogical or bad settings or props will, without a GM to adjust them, have to be ignored or played around. The mechanism is exactly the same as the one used for playing to begin with – a form of active self-deception: "This is real, I did not hear a car just then and I am indeed the lizard king."

In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, which deals extensively with the problems of immersion, this inner machine is referred to as the imaginator. If we are required to play around too many distractions, or sort out too many conflicting diegeses, the imaginator will overload and break, distancing us from the fiction. That's a good thing too – the imaginator safety system enables us to enjoy complex stories without the risk of waking up one morning in the firm belief that we are Napoleon, or Gandalf, or Buffy.

Another simple illustration of these complex processes would be a fantasy muscle. It can carry only so much, but what kind of weight, what *kind* of errors one needs to re-imagine doesn't really matter. If the amount of distraction in the physical environment is reduced, we can spend much more muscle on accepting the diegesis as true, and on not being embarrassed about, well, chanting, or dancing, or fighting with toy weapons.

The Ericsson-Sandberg approach is just that. Ericsson has said that the larpmaker should strive to control (or at least include) every aspect of the game location much the same way a tabletop GM does. Why ask the player to work against things that he could work with? These can include the feel of linen on the skin; the chemical taste of science fiction ood or the faint sound of gunshots in the distance. But they should also include the smell, the light, the temperature of the place; the time of day; the weather. We used to joke, when we were younger, about the game master-as-god. Ericsson and Sandberg see no reason for a larpmaker to abdicate that power. Immersion is a physical act, they argue; in a larp literally everything should be a part of the story.

Hamlet was played in an old underground fire-engine garage beneath a city park. The space was shaped rather like a cogwheel with a big circular space in the middle and small rooms opening out like spokes on each side. On an upper level was a long, low room, lined on one side with cupboards that were equipped for the game with metal toilet buckets and washstands. All walls were stone or concrete; the game was entirely lit with candles and some oil lamps. The rooms were decorated to look like a castle basement. The furniture was beautiful, old but very shabby (stage antiques bought off the theatre relatively cheaply).

A sort of throne room was set up in the middle, the King's office and private bedroom in one of the rooms, couches and tables and chairs in another, an extempore cinema rigged in a third. It would show, at this debauched court, both newsreels from the war and period pornography. There was a piano, and massive mahogany tables and chairs for the government to work at, and at one side was the kitchen, which fed the court royally at the beginning of the game and very strangely later on, as supplies and morale dwindled. There were gramophones and hookahs and pillows and paintings; there were games and some books and huge amounts of china – the champagne was Bollinger and Pommery, and poured in shoes and bosoms and a gigantic champagne tower. This was not, in any sense of the word, a cheap environment.

A lot of the wardrobe originated from the theatre as well. We were instructed to dress in those clothes, or our own findings, in looks no younger than the '40s and preferably worn, torn, eclectic. Although some outfits were spectacular, this created an overall effect of a culture stuck in a shabby past. Even the fashionable young wore flapper outfits, at that time (in our sense of dress history) already a dated look. Since flamboyant key pieces were lent out by the larpmakers, the quality of the visual illusion was ensured. Inspired by this level of ambition, many players never the less spent a lot of money on period props and outfits of their own.

The space, the food, the furniture, the clothes, even the chill temperature and the soft half light; the live music and the records and the music on the prop radios; all this combined to create a complex illusion of a court in isolation from the world. And then the larpwrights decided to add a universe.

A War on the World

Like horror movies, a lot of larps are set in isolated places. One logical conflict ("why don't everybody just leave?") is replaced by another one ("they really can't"). These uncrossable borders again require active re-imagining, and limit the potential scope of the action. In a stage play, by contrast, even if the action might play out in a single living room set, the surrounding world will have an air of completeness. New characters knock on the door, newspapers are read, letters will arrive.

In the movement of advanced Swedish larpmakers that Ericsson and Sandberg are a part of, this total environment has become almost a standard requirement. There are basically two ways of achieving it: setting the game in a reality close enough to ours for cars and Jell-O and Nietzsche, or by setting it in an insulated environment and controlling all information the exits and enters the game. Now, the organisers had raised the bar on this method before. At *Carolus Rex*, Ericsson's retro-futuristic space opera larp staged on a stationary Russian submarine, movement and space battle were simulated through the "ship's communication system and AI" – computers hooked to the gamemasters on duty. This, combined with a surround sound system and smoke effects for everything – the sound of torpedoes loading, damage to the hull – would have been impressive enough. But after our Royal Swedish battleship engaged in battle with a Danish vessel, we realised that we could dock to a rescue pod among the debris. Opening the hatch of the Carolus Rex, a lot of thoughts flashed through the minds of us players. What would we find in the pod? A clue, maybe. A monster. Nobody expected eight Danish crewmen in full uniform, played by eight Danish larpers, smuggled by the GMs to the game location and kept hidden until this turning point in the game.

Nothing less would be expected from Hamlet as Ericsson and Sandberg set out to build a world. Four old military telephones were hooked up from the game area to the GM room. One was the king's private line, another kept in a booth upstairs where lines formed as the war advanced and char-

acters tried to reach their homes and loved ones.

One was used by the Secretary of War to run the war, in accordance with the decisions made by the bickering and selfish government, and the king, to the extent he could be bothered with it. This being Hamlet, after all, Claudius too deteriorates as the story advances.

Every player had filled in an information slip on each person that his character might think of phoning during the game. The routine was simple: crank the phone, state your name and to whom you wish to be connected, and make small talk to the operator or wait. Meanwhile, outside, the operator would look you and your contacts up in their files, and holler for the person who played that contact last. The operators were a big bunch of the greatest tabletop GM's in the Stockholm area, working in shifts. Sometimes you could reach your contact, sometimes you couldn't. Unless the building you were calling had been bombed or abandoned, you would usually get somebody on the line. A housekeeper, maybe. Somebody's brother. Another teller at your bank. People you didn't know existed in this world, but whom, once established, you could call again. If we needed to call somebody we had not foreseen we could do just that; we were just asked before the game to give the person at the other end something, anything, to work with when we did. The operator doubled as a telegraph central.

Calling the military HQ was always especially harrowing, since both the one giving and the one receiving the orders often knew that they were pointless. At the start of the third act, when things were getting right grim, I called HQ once and I swear the person on the other end was crying when he gave me reports on our losses.

The GM operators worked at all hours, playing hundreds of characters, sending telegraphs about. Our outside communication gave them a very good idea of what was going on down there, enabling them to call us back with timely (dis)information or news of the war, which was of course carefully simulated by the GMs.

Once the riots started in the streets nobody wanted to leave the shelter, but some characters had to, and for a while communications were kept up to the largely empty "castle above". We got fresh foodstuffs, for a while (Sandberg was the in-character chef, cooking for the duration). We got newsreels, previously compiled by Ericsson from authentic period news footage. The actual projector was modern and hooked up to a laptop, but they were hidden and the person running them was one of the GM operators. We wouldn't have known if it hadn't presented us with error messages once or twice, putting our fantasy muscle to work for a moment in order to erase that memory.

The game's first act – Shakespeare's third – ends with Hamlet being banished for England. It is unclear from the text how long he is gone, but here it was established that our four-hour break moved the plot about two weeks forward. What happened "outside" in the meantime was established, in part, by these newsreel movies (no pirates in this reading, but what appeared to be a rogue submarine).

Hamlet's return in time for Ophelia's litde-parade (replacing the burial scene) and Fortinbras' at the end were not the only instances where characters entering the space was used for dramatic effect. Ophelia's brother Laertes, too, exploded down the driveway in a white-hot fury, returning from Spain as a revolutionary, to find his father murdered and sister insane, and ultimately committing treachery to his cause through aligning himself with Claudius to spite and later kill his best friend, Hamlet. Oh, and in one of the two performances of the larp, Laertes was also a girl.

Character And Text

All of the Hamlet larp goes back to the text, back to the fact that this is a play that you can read ten or fifteen times and still find



(Photo: Bengt Liljeros)

new depths in. That is how the game was conceived too, by whittling out the universe between the lines. Finding characters to pick up and flesh out, people who are in Shakespeare only glimpsed as mentions or as functions – somebody to carry the message, fill the hall, prepare the food.

A game as production-heavy[1] as Carolus Rex or Hamlet has to be performed several times for the budget to add up (actually, they tend to become financial losses any-

1 The team behind Hamlet is fairly large. Martin Ericsson (larpwright, concept design, handouts, lead writer, films, music selection, mixing, props), Christopher Sandberg (larpwright, concept design, additional writing, production lead, gastronomy lead, in-game chef, sanitation, lightning, bartending, props, set design), Anna Ericsson (larpwright, additional writing, live music co-ordination, costume lead, phone, telegraph) and Martin Brodén (larpwright, alternate history, lead ghost-story writer, additional writing, ghost effect director, phone, telegraph) with , Olle Jonsson (handout design, writing, phone, telegraph), Daniel Krauklis (original concept design, character writing, money design), Holger Jacobsson (original concept design, characters writing), Johanna Koljonen (additional writing), Craig Lindley (original film footage), Partic Erikson (original illustrations, handouts), Martin Olsson (original music, sound effects), Henrik Summanen (ghost effects), Pia Niemi (live music coordination, phone, telegraph), Jonas Lindh (cutlery and glassware), Karl Bergström (firearms and banners), Margarete Raum (firearms and costumes), Johny Hjorter Kim (transportation), NCID (on-site production and rigging), Tobias Wrigstad (phone and telegraph team lead), Karin Tidbeck (phone, telegraph), Tova Gerge (phone, telegraph) and Adriana Skarped (phone, telegraph). Costumes, props and furniture from Riksteatern. Additional props from Svarta Katten HB. Produced by Interaktiva Uppsättningar and Riksteatern JAM.

way). A positive side effect of the logistics involved is a pretty radical gender policy. Since it is difficult to foresee the gender ratio of the players, especially if certain characters require certain player qualities, character sex is simply removed as a factor. They're not gender neutral, necessarily, just either-gendered. As in Carolus Rex, gamers of either sex could play all Hamlet characters – a "Cornelia" in one cast might be a "Cornelius" in the next. This method makes it more likely that women be cast as Secretaries of State, army generals, or sleazy ageing nightclub owners. Above all, if we're creating alternate realities anyway, either-gender characters are a logical way of challenging our preconceptions on what a world is like. Sometimes this method randomly creates homosexual relationships between characters. If that is at all logical in the game world, there is of course no reason to do anything about it.

Apart from the actual players, Hamlet also included a cast of "text characters" or, as parallel terminology would have it, "non-player characters" or "instructed players". These were the main characters of the original play: Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Horatio, Fortinbras and the British Ambassador. They were special in that they were, of course, "fated", expected to do certain things, kill or leave or fight or die, at certain points in the story.

One of the most common misconceptions about the game is that these characters were "leads". The action at court was naturally structured around royal need and whim, but the text characters were central only in the sense that walls are central to having rooms. They were mostly cast with very experienced players, although exceptions were made for people who seemed particularly motivated. Again, gender was no issue, but the kings, queens, princes and Ophelias were cast according to the text because nobody thought of reversing them for one of the games. But there was indeed a girl Laertes, still a soldier with blood and grime on her pants and guns – and what guns we had; you would not believe the safety distances on these flame-breathing babies – and still a sister to Ophelia. In some aspects she was so much gendered a man that had Ophelia by slip-of-tongue said "she is my brother" nobody would have thought twice of it.

The newest and most exciting narrative method of Hamlet was the use of freeze-action soliloquy. At the agreed signal, a bell tolling, all action would stop and the players gather around the central circle. A text character player would get up and read the relevant soliloquy, or in some cases perform a short piece of dialog or even just weep, as Gertrude did over Ophelia's body at the end of the second act. Although outsiders voiced criticism to that end, this was not intended to be plot exposition for a cast of "stars". Nobody actually participating in the game thought of it that way, given how painstakingly the organisers explained what they were trying to achieve.

There is a traditional way of reading of the play in which "all the characters are Hamlet", meaning that they all grapple with the same issues. Even browsing through the text quite casually one cannot miss the themes of spying and doubling. The characters observe each other secretly and openly, and everything mirrors something else – there are two Hamlets, Hamlet has two fathers, Laertes and Hamlet mirroring each other in one way and Hamlet and young Fortinbras in another, the play-within-the-play mirrors the plot. It is not illogical, in this context, to take all characters at Elsinore and tell them they are Hamlet, and Claudius, and Gertrude. That every word spoken during the soliloquy breaks is every character's inner monologue, reflection of the mental state of everyone at court.

It worked. Nobody knew if it would, but it did. We gathered around the circle and heard those words, Claudius cursing God or Hamlet contemplating suicide, and we listened attentively and mirrored it in what was going on with our characters, and then

the bell would toll again and return us to whatever we were doing just before. The general ambience of each act had been prescribed – first act: party at the end of history, second act: intrigue, third act: despair – and the "theatrical sampling" of the soliloquies provided nuances to this player direction.

The two performances had different text casts, which made different readings possible on a few more levels. Hamlet's age isn't actually defined in the play – it depends on which level his education in Wittenberg was, and on how long Yorick the jester has been dead (if we accept that "I knew him well, Horatio"). He would seem to be either around 16 or closer to thirty. The two casts reflected this, with one Hamlet-Ophelia couple playing at puppy love gone awry and the other being the world-weary older lovers, bored, fleshier and rather frayed around the edges.

All game characters were so-called "written characters". They were created by the larpmakers and presented to the players as fragments of literary fiction. Every player also had pre-game access to his GM/writer, and the opportunity to further develop the character together with him and other players in the group. Since the game was cast by the larpmakers (based on player wishes, of course), a "group" here only indicates characters that know each other. Some of the players would typically meet for the first time at preparatory meetings.

A centrally written game this big requires a lot of plot. Some of the noble houses might have found their predicaments strangely reminiscent of *Dune* or *Elric*. Ericsson and Sandberg's largest debt, apart from Shakespeare, would still seem to be to Bertolt Brecht. The political madness at their Elsinore is never far from the tragicomedy of *Mother Courage* or the underworld court of a Mr. Peachum.[1]

Rock and Role-Playing Safety

The rules of Hamlet were quite simple: Don't be stupid. Be respectful. Do not break things or people – if you have to fight, it's full contact, low impact, and try not to be seen in a conflict until the second act. The outcome of any fight or violence, including poisoning, was tied to the dramatic structure. In the first act, you would hardly be affected; in the second you could be seriously wounded but would die only if you chose to; in the third act any hint of violence would lead to an untimely and spectacular death. Would you by chance survive the third act, it was up to you to decide whether your character deserved to live.

And the most referred to rule was the first rule of Fight Club – "you do not talk about Fight Club". Actually, this rule is also a trust rule at swinger parties, and one of the ambitions of the game was to create an atmosphere of limitless trust. A playroom for consenting adults, so to speak, outside a merely sexual framework. The rules of conduct were fixed instead at the level of Swedish law, so that although the depraved nobles mostly drank real alcohol (non-alcoholic options were available for teetotaller players), illegal substances were simulated normally – powdered sugar for cocaine and so on. In the spirit of the game it was still snorted for real, in rolled up in-game bills off the cracked chinoiserie tables.

All players were adults and mostly felt quite safe within this sealed universe. It is no secret anymore that some non-simulated sexual acts took place – and this

1 Note that Hamlet was the director's cut of the touring four-hour larp Hamlet Inifrån produced in close collaboration with Riksteatern JAM, the youth division of the Swedish National Theatre. The basic reading, characters and concept were modified and expanded but are closely based on this game. Hamlet Inifrån was created by Martin Ericsson, Holger Jacobsson, Daniel Krauklis, Mattias Gullbrandsson and Carl Heath. Produced by Anders Wendin and Patrik Liljegren.

has been criticised, again by people who were not there. Having witnessed much of the goings-on I can only say that grown-ups were making informed choices and that every player knew going in that such scenes might play out, and that one was, at all times, free to walk away from things one did not wish to see. The majority of players, I must add, did probably not even see anyone in the nude. The vow of secrecy created trust; the love of the larpmakers for their project inspired it, and the level of commitment everybody had for the project was its reward.

A word of caution is in place – most of the trustwork is done during the casting process. It worked here, but it is the most fragile element in making a larp of this intensity. The need to fill the game, or the difficulties in turning down a pal, do put pressure on the larpmakers to gamble on players of whose abilities and maturity they are not entirely sure. One should not think lightly of the risk involved.

The larpmakers did err on one point in the casting and assumed that a few flamboyantly gamist power-players would meld into the general hubbub of Elsinore madness. They didn't, interestingly. It has been suggested that there is no "wrong" way of larping. On the contrary, I would say that there are several that are wrong for every kind of game and that a bad listener, although he might be a great performer, will with great probability be an absolutely useless role-player in any serious game. On a more general level, Hamlet did blur the lines between the immersionist and gamist styles of play. Every character would logically go for the cool scene anyway, and the completeness of the milieu made it very easy to leave the outside self behind.

Another difficult issue, on which I think Hamlet failed, is the debriefing process. I think we all underestimated the effect the game would have on us. We needed to talk, all of us, not only about sex and despair – we covered that – but about politics and love and deception and all kind of stuff we learned along the way. We didn't, really. I won't make much of it here, since groundbreaking work on the creation and debriefing of larp ensembles for intensive games has been done since then, especially by Emma Wieslander on the milestone *Mellan himmel och hav* project.

Then Everybody Died

The third act is a killer. It starts in tears with Ophelia dead and laid out and goes downhill from there. The characters have been isolated together for weeks and the smell is getting aggressive. Then the submarine corps defect to the Fortinbras side and nothing can stem the invading tide; the war is essentially lost and there is shooting on the floors above. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes is to take place at six. We wait. We wait, and we die; probably every third glass of wine is poisoned; there are duels and literal backstabbing and suicides when we cannot stand it anymore. The corpses were pushed out in Polonius' old wheelchair, or carried out, one by one.

And now I'm dead. I could not do it again, could not give another order when my entire house has committed high treason. I am innocent, but I will be executed, surely; I cannot wait for it a moment longer in that bunker, will not. I get out a big and beautifully inlaid silver snuffbox and take more drugs than I ever have. I overdose gorgeously at the desk, drooling on my letter of resignation, my apology for the failure and especially for the Junior Brigades. They're dead now, most of them. They were really just boy scouts. I'm so sorry. Good-bye.

And I'm carted out, and here I am, in a control room, with coffee and fast food and GM-operators (looking almost as bad as I do) working the phones. I have to be silent. Do I want to hang around or go outside? The others are outside, just up the stairs. Take a bottle of champagne with you! Take some bread, they might be hungry. A blanket. Is it cold? They laugh. No, to sit on.

Outside are a street and cars and people wearing J Lindeberg and H&M looking at

me strangely over strollers and ice cream. I climb the stairs into the park. The lawn is gorgeous, hilly: there's a church on top, and the bell tolls all the time it seems, for us. The sky is very blue. We're wearing torn fur, dirty flapper dresses, black tie with shirts gone yellow with sweat and grime. We laugh and cry a lot and drink champagne. We look like we've been to a three-week party and every once in a while another one walks up that hill into this heaven. People stare.

At five minutes to six somebody comes for us. Ready? We walk down to the door again, to the street. At six o'clock the church bell starts, and we open the door and we can hear the signal bell down there. We walk down in single file, the dead, to take our places one last time around that circle. All the candles light the centre stage now. There is a duel, carefully choreographed but very convincing. The thing with the rapiers, the poison, the drink. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet, it happens very fast, we are standing very silently but we are all in tears. This happens in all of us even when we are dead. Horatio will live, and here are the rebels, Fortinbras' men firing. There are not many left now. They speak, the Englishman speaks. It is over. I miss the last bit, I cry too hard.

Somebody cues the theme music – we heard it at the start of the game, at every act break, I cannot take that song anymore – and we put out the candles and stand there, in the darkness. Minutes pass, electrical lights, laughter: It is over.

And it will never be over.

Games

Carolus Rex (1999) by Martin Ericsson, Karim Muammar, Henrik Summanen, Thomas Walsh and Emma Wieslander, Sweden.

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Brodén et al, Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden. Hamlet Inifrån (2000) by Martin Ericsson, Holger Jacobsson, Daniel Krauklis et al., Sweden.

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Ars Amandi, Sweden.

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Andie Nordgren

High Resolution Larping

Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond

When written, this text was my attempt to find a better way of describing the value I had found in some thematically different games and come up with a better model for explaining why some games had such a powerful impact. Most ways to explain "good games" were centered around either how good the physical illusion of the game world was or how well players managed to immerse in their characters. The idea of high resolution larping moved that discussion to the interaction between characters instead and started exploring aspects of how we negotiate boundaries between the roles of person, player, and character in larp interactions.

The concept of high resolution larping never caught on as a way to label larps, and it wasn't really intended as a label. However, I like to think it gave a way to explain and think about some key games in a way that provided enough explanation to let us move on and discuss other things, such as the details of exactly what happens when games "bleed" across the person-player-character boundaries.

For the reader today, the text provides some fairly detailed examples of strong design for participation through a mix of techniques for shaping the person, player, and character agency that should be useful to study for anyone looking to create subtle, high resolution interactions.

— Andie Nordgren



Meaningful arms in Totem. (Photo: Rasmus Høgdall)

This article introduces the idea that we can describe game interaction in terms of resolution and describes some of the methods used in the larp Totem to achieve "high resolution" game interaction. These techniques handled conflict resolution, love making, character creation and ensemble construction, building upon the methods developed in earlier Nordic larps.

Coming home from *Totem*[1] in July 2007, a tribal game made for about 25 players set in a distant future of lost culture, I was grasping for a way to describe the strong emotions, the fantastic interaction and how real the game and the world we created had felt. I had experienced the same once before, at *Mellan himmel och hav*, the "positive power drama" set in a space colony that I played in 2003. What was it that made these games so powerful to me and other players, and how could they be understood and compared to other games?

I think some live action role-playing games are a bit like being inside of a movie, while watching it at the same time. You and other players are telling a story that you get to be inside of and experience at least some parts of it as if they are real, as if it they are happening to you. But it is still a little more like watching a movie than experiencing something yourself. I have enjoyed these kinds of games immensely, some examples being *En stilla middag med familjen* and *System Danmarc*, but they never compared to *Totem* and *Mellan himmel och hav* in the "realness" and the power they had to touch me.

So here is the idea: Perhaps we should talk about detail. Not in the setting, or in the props and character backgrounds, but about the detail of the communication between characters. Maybe the interaction in the tightly knit tribe at Totem felt so real and powerful because we had managed to create a game world and vision about the

1 The Totem website www.nioma.dk/totem is mainly in Danish, but features a very illustrative photo gallery.

game that enabled subtlety across a wide spectrum of possible diegetic interactions. The experience felt, in the words of this age of digital games, like *high resolution* game interaction.

What could this computer terminology have to do with role-playing? I would like to use it to shift the attention when talking about quality of games away from the props, realism of game worlds and detailed character descriptions, to the *detail* and *quality* of interaction. What I want to talk about is not player skill and the material we have available to immerse ourselves into a character and game world, but what tools and agreements we have for making game interaction work. How do we enable or disable subtle diegetic communication? Do we like games that come close to the richness of non-game interaction in all areas, or do we like games that are more abstract and thus further from "real" communication? How do our choices in game design and preparation affect the interaction available to the players when portraying or immersing into their characters? These are some of the questions I'd like to explore.

Thresholds and Boundaries of Communication

When talking about the game interaction, a first consideration is subtlety in communication. We can talk about a threshold: what does it take for my communication to be unambiguously interpreted as in-game communication by other players? How obvious do I need to be? How do other players know that they can comfortably respond to some act of communication by me, or interaction between me and another player inside the game? I use the words in-game and offgame because there are rules, agreements and considerations that are part of how we play but not necessarily part of the diegetic world.

The games we make and play have different *affordances* – they allow us, based on open agreement or common culture, to express ourselves inside the game using different levels of detail. A lot of players have participated in games where sitting in a corner silently would be perceived as "not really playing right now" rather than something the character does, or a game where a conflict would only be recognized by other players if it was acted out in the magnitude of a bar fight, or through obviously snide remarks in an otherwise polite situation. If we are forced to interact using a clunky and obvious playing style, we can talk about this experience as a low resolution game experience. If we feel that subtle gameplay will work, the experience is of higher resolution because it contains the potential for great detail.

These issues are sometimes reduced to a question of "good players" (who supposedly understand subtleties and can play in a subtle style) versus "bad players" (who don't), or "good larps" (containing such subtle play) versus "bad larps" (that don't). Instead of this blunt reduction, I think we should talk about how the possibility for subtle play is a group process, not so much a question of skill of individual players. It is about where the players collectively think the threshold is, and where they draw the line between what they choose to interpret as in-game or off-game communication.

Different games aim for different interaction resolution, and rightly so. Low-res games can be tons of fun, and a lot of people consider the fun of games to be that they are not very much like our ordinary lives at all.

The resolution of a game experience is not only about what detail and subtleties we can use when talking to people, or what amount of our body language or winks other players can read from us and use in the feed forward loop of the game. It is also about what parts of life we can communicate about inside the game. Outside games, the possible topics and actions are dictated by social context. Games are no different – only we have to constantly evaluate anything that happens towards three sets of social rules, and negotiate the borderland



Practising Ars Amandi in a workshop before Totem. (Photo: Rasmus Høgdall)

between them. In *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman 2003) a three-fold framing of player consciousness is discussed[1]: The person playing a game has the role of a *character* in a simulated world, the role of a *player* in a game, and the role of a *person* in the larger social setting. When we perceive some act of communication while playing a game – a look, body language, spoken words – we have to decide if it falls inside the game or outside it, and if it is meant for us as character, player or person. Communication directed at us as players and characters fall inside the game agreement. There are a lot of borderline cases, usually concerned with topics such as love, sex and aggression. These are things we usually represent inside games through rules for simulation, letting these processes address the player rather than the person or the character. Sometimes there is just a common understanding that these topics should not be fully explored inside the game even if specific rules are missing, and the game culture helps define to what level they can be played out.

We are trying to portray and experience human relationships through our in-game interaction. If these relationships are limited to a lot of non-subtle play or rule based simulation in certain areas, they will likely feel less lifelike than the off-game relationships and interaction we compare them to.

But the boundaries we use for demarcating the game from real life are usually there for good reasons. We don't want players to get injured while playing, and we don't want off-game relationships to be disturbed just because we want to portray similar relationships inside a game. But if we are aiming for a game interaction experience that is high resolution across the board, we should think of ways to bring these topics back inside the game with the possibility for subtle interaction between characters while still upholding the boundaries between life and play, between character,

1 Originally from sociologist Gary Alan Fine, who researched tabletop role-playing cultures ethnographically. He based this distinction on Erving Goffman's frame analysis.

player and person, that entice us to play games in the first place.

Diegetic rules is one such method – you take a topic that is normally placed outside the game or simulated in an abstract fashion and try to weave into the fiction a way of portraying these relationships and processes that enables subtle interaction and that does not threaten to cause harm outside the game. *Ensemble play*, working with the players as a group before the game and letting them influence parts of the story and game world presents another way of increasing the potential for high resolution interaction since it can take players to a common understanding of where game boundaries are that is built during workshops rather than based on current trends in the gaming culture at hand. Both methods were used at Totem. Using that game as an example, I will discuss some game mechanics and design choices of the Totem game that enabled a lot of high resolution interaction in the hope that these examples can be useful for organizers and players when deciding what kind of game to make or play.

The Totem Game

The vision for the diegesis of *Totem* was a world where there had never been a dramatic apocalypse. Civilization had peaked, and then slowly deteriorated. More and more of culture and knowledge was lost, and all that was left in the Nordic countries were old overgrown ruins and small scattered tribes of people trying to cope in a harsh world by hunting, gathering and some herding. The game was set a couple of thousand years after civilization as we know it.

Peter S. Andreasen, who had the original vision for the game, he says that the first inspiration for the theme and genre came from a documentary about the indigenous people of New Guinea.[1] It took nearly six years for the idea to grow into the actual production of a game. The use of diegetic rules was a design decision from the start, heavily inspired by the use of the *Ars Amandi* method in *Mellan himmel och hav* that declared arms as the primary erogenous zones and sexual tools, instead of using some representation of intercourse.[2]

The game setting was a rite of passage where two tribes with mostly similar cultures met to ritually introduce their young to adult life, and let the old ones pass away. One tribe was a matriarchy, the other a patriarchy. Both tribes shared a culture where people in the tribe all fit into a strict status hierarchy, and everyone had a totem animal that was a strong marker of personality. Before the rite, the young had no identity or totem animal and could not participate in the rituals of adulthood. They were slowly introduced to all parts of adult life during three days of rituals, before leaving the site as adults.

Both tribes were led by the dominant gender, who also could take several mates. Status fights were never carried out between the genders, only within them. Two strong themes in the game were the clash of these two cultures, and the general loss of culture where more habits, stories, rituals and explanations were forgotten every time the tribes tried to reproduce their rite of passage.

The game location was a destroyed farm in the Danish countryside. The houses had burned down, leaving behind a set of ruins overgrown with weeds and a small patch of woods. This created a closed setting where the organizers had built a fireplace, a ritual circle, a sweat lodge and some other smaller places that were cleared to make arenas for play. Players slept on hay beds and sheep skins in a small shed.

1 An email interview.

2 This game and the methods used are described in two articles in Beyond Role and Play by Emma Wieslander (2004a, 2004b).



Practising Ars Ordo in a workshop before Totem. (Photo: Rasmus Høgdall)

The game was played by 24 players, with four additional organizers who portrayed the elders who led the rituals. It was preceded by two mandatory workshops where tribe culture, characters and relationships were created, starting with the original vision of the organizers about what loss of culture could mean in the futuristic tribal setting.

Aiming for High Resolution at Totem

Totem used a lot of methods to bring its world and inhabitants to life. The workshops were used to establish the methods that were later used in the game.

Characters as Relationships

The first thing you notice when making characters for a closely knit tribe, is that there is really only one thing to care about: The position of your character compared to the other members of the tribe. As there will be no need to introduce yourself to any outsiders, all labels, titles, backgrounds and professions are useless. The sometimes very tangible flow of status and connections between tribe members is the only thing that has any meaning, and this is your entire universe. So how do you create this universe in less than four workshop days?

You could say that characters at *Totem* were very thin. They were developed through a meditative dream journey led by one of the organizers in one of the pre-game workshops. Players were lying on the floor, and the organizer talked them through flying down over a vast landscape and down towards a group of people walking. Where are you in the group? Are you a leader, or a follower? Is there someone walking beside you? Do you feel comfortable, lonely, angry or something else? This very bare bones idea of your character was all we had when we started creating the group relationships through other workshop methods.

There were *frozen moments*, where scenes from the past were constructed with the players in the scene frozen in time. These could be changed by the other players, and short live scenes could be played and discussed. There was another dream journey where the totem animal was found, which added a little more about your character as

an individual. The first syllable of the animal was also your name. We went back 10 years in time, exploring who we had loved and lost during the childhood years, walking around the room finding and losing each other; characterizing the relationships. The status relationships were also explored, and an alpha male and female was chosen for each tribe, fighting it out using the *Ars Ordo* method for resolving conflicts (see below). We also sat in a ring and created specific relationships by tossing twine into a web of relationships. All of the methods focused on building group relationships. Even though many of us still felt unprepared after the last workshop, we had created a culture that was a working framework for making sense of the world inside the game.

All these methods focused on the group interaction rather than character background, which greatly supported subtle communication inside the game. Playing within the boundaries of what position of status you yourself were able to claim within the group could feel a bit dangerous at first; how separated am I really from my character? I think we all felt ok enough with it in the end since we had the very clear purpose of using the status positions to build what was one of the main cultural features of the *Totem* tragedy – finding your place within the hierarchy.

The workshops also worked on the player relationships. When you have acted like screaming monkeys hunting for mango, everyone has already embarrassed themselves in front of each other, and can afford to take game relationships to a more serious level without any significant risk of further embarrassment.

One of the main lessons of *Totem* is that letting go of the individual character and focusing almost solely on the group and its relationships can be a very effective way of enabling high resolution game interaction and strong individual dramatic arcs. If you can build a group of players *and* a group of characters, the game world doesn't need a very detailed history, description of politics, technology and races and so on to come to life. When the relationships in the game feel real, the game world feels real. You have the ability to pull the action in the game from the clunky levels of kings and politics, down into the very subtle shifts and processes in the group.

I think every player at *Totem* experienced a strong personal narrative formed by the changes in their relationship environment on the way to adult life in the three days of ritual. Like the character *Rå*, who felt sure about who was going to take him as a mate, was wrong about this and very unhappy about it, fell in love with a girl from the other tribe (taboo) and was subsequently forced to be the mate of the alpha female in his own. In the end however, *Rå* won the place as the first of the men in his tribe just like his father had hoped.

Tools for Love and Hate

We use rules when we cannot trust players to represent a topic inside the game in a safe, coherent way that doesn't spoil the game. Using diegetic rules is a way of moving these topics back inside the game world rather than excluding them or representing them with rules that are clearly off-game in the player's head.

Totem used diegetic rules for handling lust and aggression. The *Ars Amandi* method developed by Emma Wieslander for *Mellan himmel och hav* was used to handle lust and intimacy. This meant that in the world of *Totem*, love and affection were displayed by the touching of arms. This method works well because it gives the players a high resolution possibility to show affection and act out sexual relationships without (at least formally) threatening those parts of the player's everyday life. This means, that in situations where you in everyday life perhaps would have the impulse to be physically close, you can transform that impulse into a believable action inside the game (touching someone's arms) instead of pushing the thought out of your head or engaging in an act of



Totem. (Photo: Rasmus Høgdall)

simulation much further from the activity you had an impulse to engage in.

Violence and aggression is another part of human life that is usually represented through rules in larps. A question when you want to bring these elements back inside the game is how you can make it costly to lose a fight without making the price real, physical hurt for the losing player. This was solved in *Totem* by a method for status fights dubbed *Ars Ordo*. The method has several stages. The first is eye contact: If you lock eyes with someone, the one with lower status will look down. This small kind of status fight will happen all the time in everyday life, confirming the status positions in the tribe. It passes in seconds, and no-one else usually notices. This happens until there is someone who won't look down, and thus chooses to pick a fight. If none of the contestants will look down, they enter a second phase where they move towards each other. By this time there is an audience, other tribe members notice that something is going on. At this stage, looking down costs you more socially than it did when no one was looking. If the conflict is still not resolved, sound and more movement are added to the struggle. Through roaring, snarling and trying to make yourself bigger you try to make your opponent look down and back off. By now it is a matter for the whole tribe. Everyone is looking, and the one who eventually backs down by looking down can rightfully be forced to the ground, crawling to show submission. If it seems the conflict cannot be resolved by the two people involved, the other tribe members decide it for them by standing behind and supporting the one they think should come out on top.

This method created lots of opportunities for high resolution play, both for the two players involved in a fight and for the rest of the tribe. There was a clear outlet for aggression with very obvious consequences for the loser, and since the shift in status positions would also affect the other members of the tribe almost everyone got some form of interaction from every single status fight and from the constant shorter instances of eye contact that never escalated into one.

A sensitive aspect of how this method was used in *Totem* was that an initial version of the status hierarchy was established during the workshops by using the *Ars Ordo* method. If you could not claim an elevated position in the character group hierarchy, your character would not be of high status. Peter S. Andreasen explained that this part of the method can "backfire" since players can't use game rules to simulate higher status than they can claim through the social fights of *Ars Ordo* that substitutes this kind of rules. It would be interesting to see if this method or a modified version could be used in other fictional settings and still feel as believable as it did in *Totem*.

Visual Relationships

Another part of tribal life was the ritual painting of the arms and face of every tribe member. The face and arms were first covered in mud that dried to a gray-white mask, upon which the sign for your totem animal and other decorations were painted. Painting everyone was a tribal matter, but you were generally painted by a mate or would-be mate. The dominant gender would paint their own totem sign on their

mates and be painted with the same sign in return by the submissive partner as a signal of acceptance of the relationship. Since you could not paint yourself, the beauty and attention paid to your arms and face became a sign of status as well. An effect of making love using the *Ars Amandi* method was that your arm painting was thoroughly messed up and had to be lovingly (or not so lovingly) repainted again when the lovemaking was over. Painting your sign on someone when taking them as a mate was also a strong signal of ownership, and the male carrying the sign of the alpha female in the matriarchy would gain a lot of status from this. Who painted whom, with how much detail and care, and with what signs all signaled your relationships and status clearly to other players, and also left visual marks of your interaction that could be seen by players who were not there to witness it at the time it happened. The act of painting each other was very intimate, if somewhat cold when new layers of mud were added. Some examples of the strong interaction it enabled for my character Må include:



Totem. (Photo: Rasmus Høgdall)

> *Må was painted the first time by her love from last summer. It became a last fleeting memory of what had been, and a sort of good-bye ritual for the two.*
>
> *When Må woke up the second day at the ritual site, somewhat late, she knew it was now allowed for her and the other females in the tribe to take mates. When she came down to the fireplace and started looking at the men of the tribe, she suddenly saw wolves painted on what felt like all of them. Ulv, the alpha female has taken three mates, and since there are only seven men in the tribe and four women all in all, Må quickly realizes that if she wants to keep her position as second in command she needs two mates for herself. One she took out of love, the other one for pure status reasons.*
>
> *When Må took her first mate, she knew one of the other women wanted the same man. Må didn't care much since she perceived herself as above her in status, but took the opportunity to paint her totem sign on the male and thus seal the marriage when the other woman was not present. When she came back to the fireplace later, no interaction was going on between Må and her mate, but the sign of the seagull, Må's totem, was clearly painted on his arms marking what had happened. The other woman was outraged, and later tried to erase Må's totem signs from his arms by painting them over with fresh clay, a provocation that escalated into a full blown status fight over the male.*

These stories are only fragments of the interaction in *Totem*, but visualizing the relationships by ritualistic paintings provided a multitude of opportunities for highly subtle communication.

No Revolution

The overall theme of the game was tragedy – the loss of culture. There was to be no new inventions, no new tales, and above all no revolution in the game. Every player should basically spend the game finding their position in the given cultural hierar-

chy, which would in most cases result in some sort of tragedy. Perhaps you ended up at the bottom of the hierarchy, perhaps the love of your life ended up as someone else's mate. Perhaps you fought your way to the top just to find it lonely and a heavy burden. But find your place you would, and whatever you could remember of what had happened during your rite of passage, you knew you would pass on to new children of the tribe one day when it was time for you to complete the adult life you had just entered.

The theme of tragedy enabled high resolution play by creating a boundary for diegetic actions that was at the same time strong and light. It helped make it very simple to interpret and make sense of interaction in the game, and acted as a common safety net for decisions about where the story should go as a whole that made it easy to create meaning in individual game situations. But at the same time it was a light enough guidance not to disrupt these interactions with too many off-game considerations. It could be called a milder form of diegetic rule that was interwoven in the tribe culture, and thus became a strong part of the story for every character while guiding the game story as a whole in a general direction. It was not in the minds of the people in the tribes to try to change their way of life.

Closing Notes

There were many more methods used, and there is much more to tell about *Totem* as a game, but I have touched upon some of the aspects of the game that helped create high resolution interaction.

A broader philosophical question raised by the use of diegetic rules and an aim for high resolution game play is how close we want our games to resemble everyday life when it comes to the realism of relationships. Larps are powerful since they put us into bodily experiences of relationships. Rules and abstractions form a safety net that help us keep game realities separate from non-game realities.

In the *Male Workshop* at Knutpunkt 2006 (Pedersen 2006), an early version of the *Ars Ordo* method was played by a group of 30 people who spent half an hour doing alpha male exercises and had only paper thin characters when trying the method. This basically positioned players against each other, and clearly this was no fun at all for some of the participants. When asked how the workshop was part of the *Totem* process, Andreasen described it as a very raw embryo of an idea for *Ars Ordo* that was hastily thrown into live testing. He doesn't think any character could have held up as a safety net for the egos in that room after all the exercises in male dominance. The test made the importance of having a clear definition of why a method such as *Ars Ordo* was used very obvious. It would have to be a tool for character communication, not for simulation on the player level or a tool for people to battle out real life status.

It could be argued that when we have access to increasingly subtle diegetic communication, the things communicated in a game could spill over into our lives outside of the game, making it harder to uphold a sharp boundary between ourselves and the characters we play. This is probably true on some levels. Our bodies and minds have experiences inside the game that are so similar to the processes that make up everyday relationships, that sometimes we can't help but to react to them as a person as well, not as player or character. High resolution games can touch us deeply, perhaps because when we reach a certain level of subtlety we can't really hide much of ourselves behind the character even if it is obvious that we are playing a game and the character has its own reasons for action.

Some would argue that this is bad, that the character should always be a separate entity and that people who let their "personal feelings" slip into the game are bad players since they couldn't keep the distinction clear enough. I think we will always have to live with the blurred boundaries and borderline play, but if we understand a bit more about what parts of humanity

we want to enact on the character, player or person level, and in what resolution, we will be better equipped to see and negotiate the boundaries in ways that benefit ourselves and our collective game experiences.

A question I have asked myself after comparing *Totem* and *Mellan himmel och hav* to other enjoyable but more low resolution games, is whether the type of high resolution play I have come to appreciate in these games is only possible in games played by an ensemble. I hope that this is not the case, and that the idea that we can talk about game interaction in terms of resolution can bring some insights as to how you may want to play or create your next game.

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Johanna Koljonen

Eye-Witness to the Illusion

An Essay on the Impossibility of 360° Role-Playing

This essay established the 360° illusion as an identifiable aesthetic. Oddly, most people did not then notice my point — that the quest for this illusion was a dead end artistically. I described a phenomenon I would later name the "Hollow Man problem", essentially that a complete environment alone does not generate better role-playing. The text also clearly points to two counter-strategies the community were just starting to explore: abstraction (for instance metatechniques in 360° environments) and thinner characters. Both of these would prove fruitful and represented a huge design leap.

In the year that followed, grappling with the Hollow Man problem led me, via the glaringly obvious insight that the roleplay agreement is not literally true, to work I never published but lectured on extensively. I argued that "the impossibility of roleplaying" implied the next frontier in larp and freeform would be designing for bleed, a term I'd picked up from Frederik Berg. The ethics of this, I pointed out, were not clear-cut.

"Scandinavian Style Larping", was an unfortunate coinage, probably mine. Finland, where I'm from, is technically not in Scandinavia, but one of the Nordic countries — hence the term that stuck: "Nordic larp".

— Johanna Koljonen

Since the mid-nineties, a new larp aesthetic has developed in the Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Norway. I call it the 360° illusion, and attempt in the following a description of its special circumstances. Its most obvious characteristic is the ambition to place the players in a physically total, real and present environment, while refusing to limit itself to realism in genre or subject matter.

Its most surprising effect is its incompatibility with roleplaying as it has previously been understood within this gaming culture. The 360° illusion at best can create intense experiences, but it does so through replacing *internal visualisation of the room and psychological immersion into character*[1] with *physical presence in the room and visualisations, both internal and external, of character psychology*.

Readers who dislike theoretical terminology will benefit from skipping the middle section: some practical discussion of actual games is included toward the end.

Speaking of the experience of larping inevitably puts one in an anecdotal and subjective position, which is why I have chosen the essay form. A full disclosure of my position relative to the larps and larpmakers mentioned would run as long as the text itself. In short, I have played all the games used as examples unless otherwise indicated. Inevitably, most of these larpmakers are acquaintances or friends. Out of the games mentioned, I was a character coach for *Europa* and peripherally involved in character writing for *Hamlet* and *OB7*.

The full 360°

At Knutpunkt in Stockholm in 1998, Samir Belarbi gave a presentation of *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress* ("The Annual Congress of the Society of Visionary Scientists", FVV), a larp he had staged on the Stockholm-Turku ferry[2]. Whether by coincidence or through prescience, FVV exemplified everything that a then emerging Swedish gaming style would strive for: a complete universe available to interact with, a situational, emotional and physical realism in character immersion, and a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude to the physical environment of the game. I call this style the 360° illusion, in reference to the totality of both the physical game environment and the space for immersion it strives to create.

An onboard conference centre was rented for the titular meeting. The players stayed in character for the exact duration of the cruise, bringing only character belongings with them (although, presumably, off-game IDs). The setting automatically solved some of the central challenges later identified with the style and especially with larping in "the real world": providing borders to the game that are solid but feel permeable, managing character movement and communication, and dealing with non-player interaction.

In contrast to a situation in which a person larps in public in his home town, here the player's private life could intrude on the character's experience only in the unlikely event that another passenger happened to be an off-game acquaintance. And as for interaction with non-players, the choice of location made sure that they would in some sense be "in character" as well.

To Finns and Swedes alike, these cruise ships function as transitional or indeed

1 English lacks an exact match for inlevelse/eläytyminen. "Immersing" is actually closer to fördjupelse/syventyminen, but in this text the word, especially in conjunction with "psychological", is intended to retain the nuance of "placing oneself in the position of another through empathy" that "inlevelse" carries with it.

2 The description is based on Belarbi's presentation and participant recollections.

ritual spaces. It is an unvoiced cultural given that what happens on a cruise does not "count" as part of every-day life. Nearly all groups of passengers define for themselves a new set of behavioural rules for the duration of the cruise, whether the trip to them is labelled "family vacation", "romantic getaway", or "graduation blowout" – or larp. Thus the FVV players could assume with some safety that non-intrusive weirdness would be dismissed by the other passengers as some variant of cruise behaviour, rather than mental illness or offensive provocations.

FVV became significant both because of its artistic merits and the way it was discussed on the local and Scandinavian level[1]. The players' appreciation of the every-day tragedy of their superficially comical characters opened new avenues of subject matter and tone. The game fed a debate on the ethics of real-world larping that continues to this day. And at an especially fruitful moment it helped raise the bar on illusions of reality. Belarbi was at the end of an influential larp career and never made another game. But in the year he gave his presentation, preparations for Daniel Krauklis's hugely influential *Knappnålshuvudet* were already under way[2].

Apart from Swedish influences, it seems almost certain that Krauklis's team was influenced by the experiences of Eirik Fatland, who had previously organised the similarly pioneering *Kybergenesis* in Norway. Some of Fatland's methodology was adopted for *Knappnålshuvudet*, which also had a Norwegian player presence.

Tracing influences is very hard, but regardless of causality I would argue that *Knappnålshuvudet* and its direct Swedish descendants, like *Carolus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Ringblomman* (all with participating players from at least one other Nordic country), share their aesthetic with contemporary Norwegian games like *1942*, *Europa* and apparently *Panopticorp*[3].

All these larps received thorough post-game analyses at Knudepunkt conventions, feeding experiences and ideals of game aesthetics back into the scene, and less directly spawning projects with similar ambitions. These include otherwise fruitful games, like *Moira* and *Dragonbane*, that aimed for but did not successfully achieve the 360° illusion, and several games like *OB7* and *Prosopopeia Bardo*, in which I did not participate and therefore cannot adequately judge.

In the following I will focus on differences in the Swedish and Finnish traditions, as these are the gaming cultures with which I am most familiar.

Great Pretenders

In tabletop and freeform role-playing games, it is possible for players to explore dreams, memories and the borders of the map, to acquire and use items that are not represented by props or by stats, or to call a character's previously unknown aunt on a moment's notice. While none of these things are impossible to do in larps, making the option available is usually too impractical to bother, curtailing both the plot

1 A similar perfect storm of coincidental brilliance provided Finland with its ground-breaking 360° larp, Mike Pohjola's school room dystopia *.laitos* (1997).

2 Another strong influence on the naturalism of that game, which I unfortunately know very little about it, was a series of occult larps set in the 1920s, informally known as the Gyllenstierna campaign, that started in the early nineties and reached its finale with *Sista Kapitlet* in 1998.

3 For a description of the Norwegian "Hardcore-laiv" aesthetic, see Fatland (2001).

content of Scandinavian larps and the in-game actions of players in them[1].

In many other countries, the entire toolkit of tabletop is available to larpers too, making any action possible as long as one has access to a game master and a willingness to abstractly simulate physical action. Scandinavian larpers generally have neither. They would rather drive game events in a less plausible direction than play changes that require off-game logistics, like a note on a building informing players it is in fact now representing a smouldering ruin.

Yet most Scandinavian larp traditions have in fact made do with more than one kind of representation[2]. A sheet for a cape, a boffer for a sword, cardboard for a gun, a hand-written note for a lock on a door, a classroom for royal chambers, a game of chance for physical conflict. We imagine our co-players as taller, as not having a ponytail hidden in their collar, as elves, as charismatic beauties. The imagination is a strong muscle, and as long as that muscle is willing to work, a total and present 360° environment is not strictly necessary.

Transforming input into powerful images, holding them in one's mind and manipulating them is the most basic role-playing tool. We employ it to place ourselves within a narrative, but across society it is used for many other purposes. Athletes and dieters call it "visualisation", others prefer "meditation" or "hypnosis" – pagans, doing it in a group not entirely unlike tabletop roleplayers, refer to it as "magic". In tabletop, the information is mostly aural and gradually added, which initially requires a high level of concentration, but allows for a strong, real-feeling image and consequently a strong gaming experience. Contrary to the common-sense assumption, the game environment is easiest to believe in when it is entirely restricted to the imagination.

In Swedish freeform (close to some American variants of larp), the imaginary world is partially mapped out on the physical room. And in Scandinavian style larp, time and space are generally represented on a scale of 1:1, even when items, costume and the physical environment are not indexical.

The way we use our mind-muscle while larping is by accepting input for the visualisation from our whole perception – by systematically manipulating and filtering our reading of the surrounding reality. As a process this is much more complex than collective visualisation in a mood-lit room, especially since one needs to be very

1 Scandinavian Style larping is a collective term for the kinds of larps that are indigenous to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Players generally stay in character for all of the game and are attired in appropriate costumes from head to toe. During the game, playing is usually not suspended for sleeping, to simulate fights, or for any other purpose except for safety reasons or to indicate the passing of time within the narrative. Within each of the Nordic countries, however, many different gaming cultures have developed, some of them from international, commercial rules systems, all of them with differing assumptions and ideals.

2 I use the word "representation" or "representational" in reference to things that represent things that they are not. This includes both *symbolic* representation, which is dissimilar (like a word for an action or a piece of paper for an object), and *iconic* representation, which is similar (like a gesture for an action or a boffer sword for a real sword). This distinction is mostly overlooked in the article since I suspect that the effort of imagination involved in reading symbolic and iconic input is broadly the same, while reading *indexical* input (regardless of degree – a house representing either that same house or an identical house) requires almost no effort at all. On representation, see Loponen and Montola 2004, and on indexical propping, see Montola and Jonsson 2006.

attentive to the ways a greater number of co-players have interpreted the available information.

On the other hand, the sheer concentration can actually be helpful in suspending disbelief. In my experience, the process gets less demanding over time, which could help explain the special intensity of first larp experiences – the initially required discipline keeps the mind from bothering us with off-game thoughts and non-game associations.

Larping in representational games is a process of continuous translation. Back in the days when players commonly wore nametags, we made them invisible by convincing our brains that the tags were an externalised image of our character's memory processes. We turned whole characters invisible by systematically ignoring anyone with a fist above their head until our brains, too, pretended that they were not there. Our brains retroactively corrected ugly sets and bad props to fill our in-game memories with beautiful rooms and period clothes.

Settling the Art Debate

Metaphorically speaking, this kind of larping is almost like coping with autism. In our daily lives, we can assume that reality is what it is: a chair will carry our weight, a cloak will warm us, food is edible, and alcohol is intoxicating. But to function in a representational larp, we must constantly question even perceptions that in our daily lives are completely automatic.

From the player's vantage point, natural laws and causality are out of sync, memories are unreliable, making assumptions about the world is a struggle, and even human contact can be incomprehensible. Is the opposing character lying – or is the co-player just really, really unconvincing? Editing this barrage of information into a coherent whole is challenging and exhausting. But when it works, it is exhilarating, because the whole we construct is not "reality", it is "art" – and let us just sidestep the elitist baggage of that word for now by defining it in a formalist way.

If "reality" is the amalgam of our understanding and experience of nature, society and culture, then "art" constructs subsets of reality that are independent from some of its rules. All of art is based on treating information differently than we normally would – this, briefly, is the meaning of "estrangement"[1], which is the Russian formalist name for what art does. A traffic light turning red does not stop us walking if it is in a gallery, and we do not run screaming out of the movie theatre when King Kong attacks (although we do jump in our seats if he does it suddenly, since many of our responses are faster than our powers of contextualising analysis).

Estrangement from ordinary codes of communication through flexing our powers of perception is the source of the pleasure of art. And according to thinkers ranging from Victor Schklovsky to Jean Baudrillard, the purpose of fiction and artifice is in fact to invigorate our relationship to the reality around it[2].

In a 360° game, when what you see is what you get, the role-player's whole struggle of continuous visualisation goes out the window. If the game-makers succeed in presenting the player with a reality they can find plausible, then the world is the world is the world, enabling an experience that does not perceptually come across as fictional. There the estrangement arises not from the language of the situation, but from the role we present in it and the difference to our everyday lives.

1 Also translated as being defamiliarized – either way it refers to making things feel unfamiliar.

2 In "Art as Technique" and "Simulacra and Simulations", respectively. Baudrillard, with his postmodern doubts about reality, naturally paints this process in a quite more sinister light.

Depending on the setting, content and success of the game, this sense of estrangement can become very strong, but not necessarily very different to any situation in our private lives that we would describe as feeling "unreal".

To a player from a strongly representational game culture, the 360° environment can be startlingly disappointing. If no effort of self-estrangement goes into putting you in that fictional space, then it is indeed often you, not the carefully constructed character with its carefully filtered thoughts, that stands awed in the medieval village.

As long as immersion into the game world requires continuously transforming your understanding of reality into the significantly different perception of your character, even brooding in relative isolation ("Turku style") is an interaction with the game itself. If, on the other hand, the environment requires no transforming visualisation, the experience of being in character must be supported by something else entirely. But before I get into what that can be, we must make a small digression to consider what believing in a character entails.

Portraying "Self"

Aesthetically speaking, realism is only an -ism among others[1]. It is prevalent enough in Western culture to sometimes get confused with reality itself: many of the symbols and agreements of its constructed representations are common enough not to create an obvious sense of estrangement in the audience any more.

But we certainly have the choice of telling stories about reality differently. When I speak of the 360° illusion, it is not because "360° realism" sounded less cool: it is because this aesthetic – not unexpectedly in a cultural form sprung from the fantastic – does not seem to accept the adequacy of the realist narrative as a description of reality. Nor does the ambition to create a tangible world limit the larpmakers to realism in genre or subject matter.

Represented "reality" must always be pruned for length, plausibility, dramatic purposes and on ideological grounds. This is demonstrated by the vast chasm between fictional representations of identity (causal, coherent, with specific properties) and our first-hand experiences of being "ourselves" (random, biological, in a variety of social roles). We turn our-selves into fictions too. We say: "I am like this" to explain our actions coherently, even though we know that is not what we are like at every moment of every day.

It is not impossible for art to convey subjective identity. Modernist novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had some considerable success at this. Unfortunately, the better the artist mimics stream of consciousness, the less we understand of, or care about, the plot. Even Woolfs accessible *Mrs Dalloway*, while leaving us with a detailed snapshot of its main character, suffers from this problem: it is difficult to remember what actually happens in it.

Being fiction and belonging to our culture, it makes practical sense for larps to operate with characters that are realistic – in accordance with our cultural traditions if not our personal experience. But since in larps we observe the fictional character from inside an actual head, this is the one art form where this tension between realism and reality is difficult to ignore.

1 More properly, a number of related -isms in the arts. Realism was a reaction to romanticism and is the opposite of idealism. Realists attempt to describe things accurately and objectively, aesthetically seeming to reject symbolism and politically often rejecting idealized and beautiful subject matters. The logical problem of realism is, that even naturalistic representation involves interpretation, what is shown is inevitably symbolic of something the artist wishes to convey.

In a representational game, with all the translation going on, "being in character" is like reading a novel – or rather improvising one in one's head. Reading icons like "room" and "gun" creates one's own character too, because text always implies an author, and interpretation always implies an interpreter. The process of visualisation is perhaps not unlike the language we interpret to harvest the experiences and emotions of Mrs Dalloway – except that in this case, we also participate in writing the book.

In an indexical environment, on the other hand, since everything around us is "real", the estranging fiction emerges from the characters we play. In comparison with what it feels like to be me in a room, being my character in that same room does not feel real at all.

Even if we manage not to think of our off-game lives – which is not all that difficult, once the mid-term memory gets filled with game events – we are left with immense mental resources used, typically, to think as little as possible. In the vast expanse of identity, the character information we had going in (name, number of siblings, location of secret map) only amounts to some insignificant rubbish in the corner of a vast, echoing emptiness. In reality, our thoughts and memories are manifold. In the game, our characters become single-minded in the extreme.

You could argue that this creates estrangement. At its best it can certainly convey the experience of leading a passionate, unmediated, non-reflexive life. At its worst, it makes belief in the character impossible. Perhaps this is why Swedish fantasy larpers in the mid-nineties said that they sometimes did not even feel in character until the third day of the game.

In Medieval Underwear

One reason for the 360° illusion to emerge so strongly in Sweden in the late 90s was that the fantasy genre already had a head start[1]. For years, Swedish fantasy gaming had increasingly focused on period outfits and gear. Many Swedish larpers very seriously believe that even period underwear is necessary as not to disturb oneself or the co-players with reminders of the outside world. (Requiring a substantial investment of time and/or money has the additional affect of guaranteeing that the players show up on the day).

This sense of responsibility for the closest co-players is fuelled by the tradition of plotting the games on the level of (sometimes quite large) character groups. As for individual character personalities, in this type of game the players or player groups pretty much developed those themselves.

The appeal of this style of gaming – of being in, experiencing and sharing a fantasy world together – is obvious. Yet at its most extreme, this tradition is said to have resulted in larps focused entirely on hanging out: off-game buddy groups on feel-good fantasy tourist trips to campfire country. There may have been some truth in this, but on the other hand the same games also catered for player groups interested in interaction, especially political or armed conflict ("adventure", broadly speaking).

Still, if one considers larp an opportunity for in-character socialising in a visually realistic fairytale environment (last-day orc attack optional), there is really no need and scant opportunity for character immersion in the sense of translation and visualisation.

On the other hand, since the activities one's character engages in – walking on uneven paths, cooking on open fires, digging, drawing carts, swinging swords, crapping

1 Other reasons probably include the high level of organisation and positive media image, which enabled financial grants for these often quite costly productions, and participant overlap with the Society of Creative Anachronism.

in a hole and generally roughing it – are mostly outside the scope of one's private life, they are enough to conjure up a sense of estrangement akin to that of an exotic vacation.

This method of physical immersion has the added benefits of continuously reminding the player of the tangible reality of the game world, of encouraging the players to action, and of bringing a vivid sense of immediacy to the proceedings. The head may be resting, so the speak, but the body is alive.

I do want to emphasise the continuing validity of this aesthetic even as I presume to call it anti-intellectual. If one's goal is to give the players new ideas and insights, achieving it through a larp of this kind would be quite challenging (although historically not im-possible). Similarly, achieving sense of wonder will get progressively more difficult as players get used to the environment.

By the late nineties, many larpmakers were looking for new options. Some took the complete environment to other worlds and genres (the Star Wars-game *Röd Måne* set on a forest planet especially springs to mind), others went looking for ways to insert ideas and advanced storytelling in it, and out of these quests the 360° illusion emerged.

When the 360° illusionists looked for ways to fill the mental space left by receding imagination, they turned to two important facets of the tradition of Swedish indexical fantasy. The emphasis on physical immersion – later leading to an almost comical proliferation of pre-game physical improv sessions – was carried over as an ideal of good gaming. And so was the inherent assumption that larping is a group activity. This has resulted in the ensemble playing method.

The ensemble player employs aspects of his role to support the initiatives of his co-players with the express purpose of creating satisfyingly dramatic situations for the group to experience. The ensemble is collectively responsible for the dramatic arc in the whole game as well as each scene, and may choose to do something implausible or illogical to achieve the most moving narrative. An influence from the Swedish free-form scene, which has viewed playing in a similar way since the early 90s, is not unlikely.

Personality Striptease

In Finnish larps, by contrast, the characters have usually been written by the game-master, who communicates the plot to each player in the shape of a more or less detailed description of the character's situation and psychology.[1] Since reacting to new in-game information in plausible accordance with this description is ideally necessary for further information to be revealed and the plot to unfold[2], Finnish larp culture places great weight on psychological immersion into the role.

The task of the player could be summarised as mastering his character before the game, and exploring the truth of this character through action and interaction during it. Performing this task correctly or even enjoying it does not in itself require immersion on the level of actually feeling the character's emotions – they only have to be taken into account. I suspect psychological immersion became the Finnish ideal because the fog of emotions helps to obscure the (sometimes clunky and obvious) mechanism of the gradual reveal of the story arc.

1 Players can express preferences as to character type, but are centrally cast and not expected to prefer playing with their friends.

2 While in practice many characters were filler, there was broad agreement within the gaming culture that a good larp made every character feel like the main character – i.e. provided each with ample, personally relevant "plot".

From deep inside the fiction, the fiction is always logical, and for a character, the unfolding action is always new, whether or not the player has seen stories take similar turns before. Thus immersion strengthens the player's experience of the narrative. The downside is that a highly immersive player playing a passive, grieving or shocked character will sometimes block the action unnecessarily. Very roughly put, the Swedish tradition tends to lean on action, sometimes created through emotion, and the Finnish on emotion, sometimes expressed through action.

At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the characters were treated as storytelling functions in the Finnish manner. But in harmony with Swedish larp culture, Krauklis and his team placed equal emphasis on physical improvisation as on the written materials. Just as the psychological institute in the game was indexical and present, just as the whole world was available to the players on a 1:1 scale, so the entire body was co-opted for a playing field. That the characters were all in therapy, much of it tactile and bodily, was in retrospect even more important than the pre-game improv in keeping the body involved. The player-characters were encouraged to experience grief, anger, frustration, and joy all through: involving lungs, muscles, tear ducts, and brain chemistry.

A Hen on the Open Sea

Only a decade ago, the idea of going to a larp to suffer was considered new and fairly foolish. To some, *Knappnålshuvudet* may still sound like a pretty terrifying experience. As for suffering, that really does not need to deter from art – if people avoid reading *Crime and Punishment*, it is not on account of the titular criminal getting such a bum deal. It is because involvement with any story of that ambition and magnitude seems like a commitment. Ah, you say, but then the pain stays in the novel? The reason *Knappnålshuvudet* was not terrifying is the same: its borders were clearly defined.

Borders that limit the game are useful for the dual purposes of framing the fiction and for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. Knowing that something has a beginning and an end not only makes turning it into a narrative possible – it also makes almost anything tolerable in the middle. Marking this beginning and this end with a ritual action, however minor, is especially helpful if the intervening period is to be spent away from one's everyday self.

Let us imagine for a moment that I am getting married, and my friends, in a profoundly disappointing misjudgement of my taste, organise my hen party on the Stockholm-Turku ferry. They bring me to the harbour blindfolded, revealing where we are only as we show our passports to the customs official.

The boat is reached through a series of gates, one of them the entirely fictional gate with the ship's name painted on it, by which the ship photographer takes a humiliating group picture. This is the first activity of the party and the cruise: I do not usually allow strange men to take my picture, but I am already bound by the implicit rules of the party. I do not usually drink alcohol on a Tuesday afternoon or a Wednesday morning, dance sexily in a Spider-Man costume while singing karaoke, or travel without a cell phone and computer, but on this cruise, I probably would. In real terms, these things should be as embarrassing to me on the sea as they are on land. Yet I am prepared to accept them in this context.

If you argue that these are all minor things that I would be shallow to care about anyway, consider for a moment that a significant number of polled Finns were of the opinion that casual sex while intoxicated on a cruise does not count as infidelity. Would I crown my hen party by sleeping with the cruise host? No, as "I am not like that." But neither am I the person who appears in public in a Spider-Man costume and a beer-stained tutu. The Meilahti model postulates that the fictionality of our larp roles in comparison with our other social

roles is irrelevant, since the experiences are real (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003).

That does not render the limits between these roles irrelevant, on the contrary we rely on borders in real life as well to enable a hierarchy between our experiences, allowing some of them to "count" more than others towards the construction we consider our "identity". A series of gates helps me encircle my cruise experiences with a border marked "exceptional, true", just as standing in a circle in a darkened room listening to a certain song can help me mark an overdose at a larp as "exceptional, fiction".

Highly representational larps automatically include all kinds of borders and differences in comparison with real life. Restriction to a specific area, violence without physical consequences, the memory of "my husband" devoid of corresponding emotions, and of course the limited range of thoughts and actions that were available to the role in the fictional situation – all of these are estranging, which helps us organise the information as "art" rather than "life". (A ritual ending – an applause, a debrief, a silence, a gate – is often helpfully tacked on anyway).

In a 360° illusion, where many borders are obscured on purpose, others may need to be erected. *Knappnålshuvudet* had an agreed-upon time frame, but no physical borders. However, the unravelling of the plot was directed in some detail through the use of fates (*skjebne*)[1], constructed to ensure an intense catharsis experience for each player. Limited to one a day, the skjebnes were only minimally intrusive to player freedom, but they served as a reminder that the action was not arbitrary, giving the players a tool to bounce improvisations off – or to support themselves on if they felt like the story was pulling them under.

A similar marker of the fiction's borders is the safety word, borrowed into intensive larping from S/M world and used to perforate the surface of the story when its reality becomes too uncomfortable.

Moira, which required the players to perform in (iconic) heavy make-up in the otherwise purportedly indexical environment, successfully mapped out the borders of its fiction on the building in which it was played. The top floor was the in-character game area, on the middle floor a player would still be in character but perform actions not normally expected of fairies, such as brushing teeth, and the lowest floor was entirely off-game and used as a dressing room for touch-ups. Converted into a physical act, passing in and out of character became as simple as the verbal markers used to do the same in a tabletop game.

Reliable But Permeable Borders

Time, space and story borders are helpful, but also a nuisance. They impose on all larpers a filter of self-censorship, which in all too many games is in conflict with both the ambition to create cool situations and the ambition always to act in accordance with character logic. The player is forced to censor all off-game thoughts, which is inevitable to some degree, and all character impulses that are impractical to realise in a game situation, which can actually be avoided.

Creating a real 360° illusion requires solving this problem, which FVV can elegantly illustrate. Since the game was set in our reality, it automatically provided a complete world of experiences to reference during the game – removing the problem of players having to edit their associative processes or to make up fictional but "commonly known" cultural phenomena. The practical

1 A storytelling device. A non-diegetic instruction ensuring that the player has his character perform a certain often seemingly unimportant action, or appear in a certain place, at an agreed upon time.

constraints of being at sea solved the problem of unrestricted physical movement diluting the interaction.

The common problem of characters needing to contact other fictional characters, forcing the players to make up plausible reasons not to, was automatically solved by real-world technical limitations: at the time, the ferries were equipped with impractical and unreliable satellitephones, and had no cell coverage for most of the cruise.

The space ship of *Carolus Rex*, the asylum centre at *Europa*, and the bomb shelter at *Hamlet* all functioned similarly – adding one crucial aspect, the permeability of the border. Even when a physical border is logical to the game world – a border the characters *do not want to* cross – the players veer toward treating it as an absolute that their characters would not conceive of violating – a border the characters *cannot* cross.

To liberate players from this self-censorship, the totality of the surrounding world needs to be demonstrated. *Hamlet* had three phone lines out of the bunker that the players could use to call anyone they pleased in all of fictional Denmark – and reach them or not, depending on the roster of experienced table top game masters at the other end managing the simulation of the surrounding world.

A few hours into *Carolus Rex*, a retro-futuristic pulp adventure set during a war between the space empires of Sweden and Denmark, the ship made contact with an escape pod from another ship. The players struggled for some time to find a way around this dilemma – they could not explore it, since they "knew" that their space ship was really a museum submarine, and that only the game masters and the off-game world remained on deck.

As the ship's AI, played by a GM on the outside, steadfastly refused to accept any of their many excuses, the docking was finally performed. Down the opened hatch came a large group of uniformed enemy combatants, portrayed by Danish larpers secretly smuggled to the game area and kept hidden until the Swedish players were all in the game.

A plausible universe can deliver surprises. To make the player accept the border of the game as something else than the border of the fiction, it is the duty of the truly illusionist game master to demonstrate that characters, plots and information could, and sometimes will, cross them.

360° Surreality

In games concerned with people not in continuous action – prisoners, asylum seekers, philosophers, the grieving, the waiting – physical immersion is a less helpful practice. To simulate a freewheeling, unpredictable inner universe other methods have proved necessary. This was the breakthrough innovation of *Knappnålshuvudet*: the emphasis on creating character memories not only before the game (through agreement, improv, literature and private preparation) but during it.

Into the otherwise indexic milieu, three symbolic elements were introduced to reflect and affect the inner landscape of the characters: sound, emotions externalised as invisible non-player characters or "angels", and an abstract room in which dreams, memories or emotions could be acted out with the aid of these angels.

Before *Knappnålshuvudet* sound design, efficient because sound so easily slips past our analytical faculties, had long been neglected in the larp world. At the larp, meta-diegetic music played at low volumes within the building created moods or associations for the players to engage with. In the abstract game space or "womb" (see below), a soundscape composed for the purpose represented the voice of God (the same composer, Henrik Summanen, would go on to create the 72-hour meta-diegetic soundtrack for *Mellan Himmel och Hav*).

Meta-diegetic sound was apparently also employed at *Europa* to simulate post-traumatic stress in the asylum seekers – although curiously, my brain has filtered out this information from the in-game memories themselves[1]. Both *Hamlet* and *Carolus Rex* used diegetic sound (bombing, crowds, engine sounds, torpedoes sent and received) to create a three-dimensional world around the game area.

In *Knappnålshuvudet*, dumbfounded players were awoken in the middle of the night and led to the womb to "dream" – to act out primal memories or work through the events of the day. In *Europa*, some of the refugees were granted a meta-diegetic meeting with "the bureaucrats". Although played during the game in a building in the asylum centre complex, these scenes were not to be considered literally true. The players were free to use them as fodder for memories or treat them as daydreams, nightmares or potential futures.

In *Hamlet*, the game action was intermittently sus-pended for all the characters to gather and hear a performed soliloquy from Shakespeare's play. The players were instructed to treat the soliloquy as an external manifestation of the psychological struggles of their own character.

In parallel with the 360° illusion – or perhaps as a subcategory of it, if abstraction can be said to indexically represent abstraction – another experimental aesthetic has developed in the Scandinavian countries. These game-spaces are difficult to rate on the symbolic-iconic-indexical scale. What does a symbol represent if it can represent everything? What do your dreams "really" look like from within? Was the trash heap setting of *Amerika* literal? Were the white canvas labyrinths in which *inside:outside*, *Hamlet inifrån* and *Mellan himmel och hav* took place symbolic or iconic?

In *Luminescence*, possibly the most symbolic larp of all time, the terminal patients were placed in an abstractly lit room on a tonne of white flour – and the players instructed to treat this fact as both literal and entirely expected. The way this distances the player from the fiction is positively Brechtian: I suspect the result of this kind of estrangement is the opposite of psychological immersion, but then again, there is something both powerful and appealing about using fiction as a petri dish for ideological reflection. I guess we could call it intellectual immersion.

Not Walk Alone

The angels of *Knappnålshuvudet* remain the most beautiful illustration of the way the 360° illusion can express inner reality through external action. Each tiny player group was written to the theme of an emotion, given physical form by their guardian angel. The angels were clad and painted all in grey for easy identification, and when there were two or more of them in the room, they moved softly and in seemingly telepathic synchronisation.

The angels were diegetically present, and although the characters could not understand seeing them nor interact with them directly, the players were intended to do both. The angels were even scented to make it possible to sense their presence before they stepped into view.

The angel players (practically bordering on game masters) could punctuate character actions through physical movement, make suggestions through nudging them in the correct direction, enact inner conflict through whispering in their ears, comfort them through touch or protect them by blocking their way. Since the angels

1 As in film theory, diegetic sound is audible to the characters, meta-diegetic sound is representative of or directly affecting (the inner worlds of) the characters, and non-diegetic sound is a communication between the author and the audience. An example of non-diegetic larp music is the melody played at the beginning and end of each act of *Hamlet* while the players were going into and out of character.

had studied both the character descriptions and the skjebnes, they came across as all-knowing.

If interpretation implies an interpreter, so does interaction, and ultimately this is the form of

being and doing that saves the 360° illusion from its own efficiency. A grief-stricken character in a representational game can be immersed in by a player through continuous visualisation even though he is sitting alone in the bathroom. In a 360° illusion, especially in the early parts of the game, balancing the fictional inner life with the actual surroundings is harder. It helps to cry quite loudly, to know that someone might hear – this turns the solitude into interaction, but it is perhaps not what the character would really do with his secret sorrow. At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the character crying silently was at this moment of the story represented by two players: himself grieving, and his angel, that other part of himself, either comforting, or weeping with him, or egging him on.

A Feature, Not a Bug

Even in the best of 360° illusions, some elements that disturb the fiction will remain. If nothing else, having previously seen the players as themselves can provide a blip in the fiction's internal logic – a potentially significant blip, since representational elements in indexical surroundings easily sabotage the whole venture. Given that the illusion is unstable even over the course of the same game, I have seen more failed illusions than I have seen successes. The experiences have been rewarding all the same. The ambition at totality is enticing in itself, and besides, the players can often turn a collapsed illusion into a good (albeit often unnecessarily expensive) representational larp.

Perhaps role-playing games should be divided into three categories: those that are created all through visualisation (tabletop), those that require continuous translation (free-form and larp) and those in which the environment can be accepted at face value (larping in the 360° environment). In the last category, the process of role-playing is the least cerebral. It becomes immediate, physical, and social. It may not even be role-playing in the sense of constructing a shared fiction. As a mental process, it lies closer to the sense in which we role-play in our everyday lives – except that in this role, we actively censor recollections of our other roles and environments.

This necessary refusal of complete personality within the complete environment can make the most perfect 360° illusion feel pointless and hollow. With the aid of physical immersion, immediate action and social interaction, and occasional bursts of stubborn self-suggestion, this emptiness can be kept at bay and the off-game blips to a minimum.

That said, the next logical step for the 360° illusionists is to start treating this weakness not as a problem but as an integral part of the aesthetic. At the *Prosopopeia Bardo* games *Där vi föll* and *Momentum* the players were apparently instructed to fill the emptiness with their own lives, memories and experiences. I guess this works, but it does limit the range of possible characters more than a little.

Most larpmakers must find another way to balance the internal illusion with the external, to make the limited personality of the characters generate wondrous estrangement rather than startling disappointment. Only then can the 360° illusion be lived like a life, experienced and remembered with an extra-ordinary vividness, and allowed to affect us profoundly.

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Markus Montola

Social Reality in Roleplaying Games

During the last ten years I have written a number of articles discussing how roleplaying is possible and what happens when people roleplay. That work culminated in my doctoral dissertation On the Edge of the Magic Circle, which presents a framework for discussing and analyzing pervasive games and roleplaying. This essay is a brief introduction to that framework.

— Markus Montola

I have been thinking for a long time about what exactly happens when we roleplay. Many disciplines from psychology to sociology could be used to produce different kinds models on the core process of roleplaying. In my doctoral dissertation[1] I presented a one based on a form of social constructionism developed by the philosopher John R. Searle. In this synopsis, I introduce the central terminology that forms a conceptual framework for analyzing roleplaying games.

Before diving into the topic of roleplaying, a brief introduction of Searle's constructionism is called for. In Searle's work reality consists of two layers: the *social reality*, and the *brute reality*. Simply put, all material things belong to the brute reality, and all immaterial things belong to social reality. If we look at a *chess* set consisting of playing pieces and a chessboard, it is a brute fact that the physical pieces exist. But everything about how they are used to play a game of *chess* belongs to the realm of social facts.

Searle argues that social reality is constructed through *constitutive rules*. Constitutive rules are not rules in the traditional sense — they are not directives on how one should behave in a given situation and they cannot be broken in the traditional sense. Rather, constitutive rules are social structures we use to establish social institutions.

For example, *Laws of Chess* has the following rule:

> The rook may move to any square along the file or the rank on which it stands.

Although superficially this might be read as a rule delimiting the way a rook can be moved, its real function is the opposite: It gives the rook a power to "move" in the context of a *chess* game. Even more fundamentally, rules such as the one above make it possible for a rook to exist in the context of the game. And when two players initiate a game of *chess*, they implicitly agree that this piece of wood counts as a rook in this game of chess. Or if a proper piece cannot be found, perhaps this saltshaker counts as the rook until we find a better token.

Searle argues that all social reality is founded on constitutive rules, from money to games and from organizations to politics. Sometimes such a status is assigned to a physical object — typically it is a specially prepared piece of wood that is used as a rook in a game of *chess* — but a material form is not a necessity. Blindfold chess needs no physical pieces.

According to Searle, constitutive rules can usually be formulated in the form "X counts as Y in the context C", for example, a carved piece of wood counts as a rook in the context of *chess*, or a piece of paper counts as legal tender in the context of the Eurozone. Similarly, they can grant you the status of being a character in a roleplaying game.

This is how we roleplay.

The Monitor Celestra is a good larp to use to illustrate this framework, as it was set in the somewhat well known universe of *Battlestar Galactica*. In that game I had the status of being Major Darlington of the Colonial Fleet. That status was based on the same kind of social mechanics that assign the status of legal tender to a piece of paper and make Barack Obama the President of the United States.

That is what roleplaying is all about: Establishing specific sets of constitutive rules and constructing social institutions for the

1 Many ideas presented in this essay have been originally suggested by others, but I have omitted references from this introduction in the interest of approachability. For a properly referenced look beyond the surface, see Montola (2012), except for the section on Peirce's semiotics, which is from Loponen & Montola (2004).

purpose of playing the game. Context is the key here, as these statuses only exist within the game: Caprican bank notes have no value outside The Monitor Celestra. This kind of meaning that is relevant only within the context of a specific system can be called endogenous meaning.

Constitutive rules provide things with powers and obligations in social reality. For example, being a rook grants a piece of wood the power to move horizontally in the context of chess and Euros can be used to pay taxes in Eurozone countries. Status also comes with obligations: A rook cannot move diagonally, and an officer in larp military must follow the orders given by his superiors.

In Searle's terms, social institutions are often built on other, pre-existing social institutions. In other words, social institutions overlap and build on one another. If marines play a game of Triad[1] during The Monitor Celestra, the pieces of paper they put on the table count as money only in the context of the Celestra, and placing money on the table counts as making a wager only in the context of Triad.

One Game World, Many Diegeses

Considering how complicated our social reality is, we have an astonishing ability to navigate it. Searle argues that we learn to understand social world due to our constant interaction with others. Our relationship with social reality is under constant scrutiny, and whenever we err, we correct each other.

However, in the process of roleplay we constantly engage new pieces of endogenous meaning. If the game master of a tabletop roleplaying game declares that there is a large rock in the middle of the field, she uses verbal expressions to create two pieces of endogenous meaning out of thin air — the field and the large rock. They now exist in the context of the game.

But since we can hardly imagine a world with nothing but a field and a rock, we fill in the incomplete world with assumptions: If you try to imagine a field, you probably assume that there is a sky above the field, or perhaps forest around it. Perhaps the field you imagine is circular and the large rock is pretty exactly in the center of the field. But, how large exactly is the large rock?

Players operate in the game based on their best assumptions of the state of the game world. Years ago I played in a game in which a player character approached a large rock in a field in order to hide behind it. Only when an enemy on the other side of the field started shooting at him it was understood that for the game master, the large rock was large enough to be thrown, but for the player it was large enough to hide behind.

These small misunderstandings take place constantly when we roleplay, and they are impossible to detect or to correct perfectly. They also happen in larp, whenever something is used to represent something else. When someone wears a shabby suit to a larp, this leaves other players wondering whether it is a bad representation of a spiffy outfit or a great representation of a dowdy one.

Because of the constant misunderstandings and reflexive corrections based on assumptions, it is useful to distinguish the concept of *game world* from that of *diegesis*. Game world denotes an objective view on what is true in the game; it is lazy but useful shorthand for talking about the agreed-on truths of the game. Diegesis (originally from the field of film studies) denotes one player's entire understanding of what is true in the game world, and in any single multi-player game there are always multiple concurrent diegeses.

1 *Triad* is a game similar to *five-card draw poker* in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe.

The fact that diegeses are always subjective is not always relevant. For instance, we rarely need to discuss the reality of the game world while playing *chess*. Or in a larp, perhaps a consensus somehow emerges in the room that a high-ranking executive is wearing a terrible suit, and interesting game dynamics emerge out of that fact. In the game world, the suit is as shabby as it is in the context of ordinary life.

However, even the smallest events can highlight the conflict between different understandings of the game's reality. If a new player enters the room later, she might make the assumption that the costume is intended to be very stylish, and start playing according to her interpretation. This is where the concept of diegesis comes in handy. In one player's diegesis the suit is perfect, in another's it is terrible. The contradiction might never be solved, or it might never become an issue. That is usually the case; after all, diegeses are never identical, but conflicts only happen every now and then. When the unavoidable contradictions go undetected, we can say that two persons' diegeses are *equifinal* — they lead to indistinguishable consequences.

But if the newcomer, for some reason, loudly compliments the fashionable outfit, the equifinality is lost and the conflict becomes visible. The illusion of everyone operating in the same social world is broken for a moment, and players need to resolve the conflict in some way — sometimes the game is paused for out-of-character negotiation, but often the players realign their readings without breaking play. In tabletop roleplaying games the game master usually serves as the arbiter, while in larp we might look at the wearer of the outfit for interpretational cues.

It is important to note that the diegesis is not just the player's interpretation of what she sees and hears during the game, but it also includes significant internal contribution that is never voiced aloud. If a commanding officer considers airlocking a mutineer but never acts on the impulse, that planning and consideration is a diegetic fact for that player. Although the mutineer never learns that he had a brush with death, the officer's player is obliged to base his future play on the fact that he almost decided to execute someone.

Communicating Diegeses

Because of the importance of equifinal understandings, we need to look at how the negotiations and communication about diegeses takes place. This can be analyzed through the work of Charles S. Peirce, who studied how we use signs to convey meaning. All signs, whether they are sounds, gestures, props, written words or something else, are brute facts, but the meanings they convey reside in the social reality.

According to Peirce's most famous classification, a sign can be a symbol, an icon or an index:

Symbols refer to their objects through convention. The word "blue" refers to a certain color only because we have the habit of using that word to mean that group of wavelengths. Similarly, players know that a blue military uniform means that the wearer is a *Galactica* officer, because they have prior understanding of that symbolic connection. Conventions must be learned to be understood: On *Celestra*, only the players of *Galactica* crew could tell lieutenants and ensigns apart, because only those players had studied the symbolic meanings of military insignia.

Icons refer to their objects through similarity. Boffer swords refer to steel swords through being similar in form. An observer does not need prior knowledge on boffer swords to understand that a contraption made out of cell foam and silver-colored duct tape represents a sword.

Indices refer to their objects through a factual connection to its object. Smoke is an index of fire, a photograph is an index of the photographed event — or at least it used to be before the age of Photoshop. In

discussions on larp props and scenography, indexicality is used to denote that a material object represents *itself* in the diegesis. Sometimes this has trivial implications: When marines march along a steel-floored corridor, the sound of their boots is an index of their approach. But in some cases, such as in the case of larps played out on the streets, the idea of indexicality reveals complicated relationships of real world and diegetic reality.

If we look at the previous example of an corporate executive in a larp wearing a terrible suit through Peirce's framework, the disjunction of diegeses becomes obvious. For some, a shabby suit is an icon of a nondescript suit; it may look worn-out, but it is intended to represent a similar but sharp outfit. For others, the iconicity is more precise: A worn-out suit might be an icon of a worn-out suit. Pre-game communication is the way of minimizing these contradictions, agreeing on the standards of costuming and scenography.

Depending on the game world, the suit can even be an index of itself. If the brute object is designed and manufactured by Hugo Boss, it cannot represent itself in the world of *Battlestar Galactica* — but in a contemporary real-world larp it can. Sometimes X counts just as X in the context C.

Only after determining what the suit stands for in the diegesis, we can interpret its implications. Depending on its texture, coloring, cut and quality we can determine that the player wearing it is representing a corporate executive, a Tauron mobster, or a Caprican refugee.

The Rules of Roleplaying

This far we have determined that roleplaying games are systems in which we create endogenous meaning and that those systems are based on constitutive rules. We have discussed how objects in games can communicate meaning and how we might interpret those meanings in divergent ways. Next we will look at what kind of rules are used to establish those institutions. Rules are required to provide a stable framework for the process, as otherwise it might be too difficult to juggle conflicting diegeses and the reality of the game might fall apart.

The process of diegesis construction is based on what I call the three *invisible rules of roleplaying*:

1. *World Rule*: Roleplaying is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.

2. *Power Rule:* The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.

3. *Character Rule:* Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

Or, in short, roleplaying is about manipulating an imaginary world together, following a power hierarchy, where at least some participants portray beings living in that world.

While this description is very loose, it contains the seeds of many features of most roleplaying games. For instance the World Rule implies that roleplaying has to follow a certain level of causality, coherence, and chronological sequentiality. Actions lead to other actions, and taking back actions is generally considered taboo. The Power Rule often manifests in the specific powers of a game master, as formal rules or as reliance on dice, but other power hierarchies have been developed as well. The Character Rule is necessary to distinguish roleplaying from other types of improvised performance.

The stability offered by these rules differentiates roleplaying games from most instances of children's spontaneous make-believe. In roleplaying we subscribe

to the idea that we must take other players' actions and decisions into account and that we cannot spontaneously change the rules of the game or diverge from the endogenous meaning already created in the process. This core is common to all forms of roleplaying.

Further invisible rules can be discerned as well for the various subtypes of roleplaying games. For instance tabletop roleplaying can be defined through its use of verbal descriptions in describing the diegeses, while in larp the material world is the primary source of diegetic information.

In addition to the three fundamental rules of roleplaying, roleplaying happens in a complicated network of numerous kinds of rules. Going from the psychological reality to social reality and finally brute reality, we can identify at least six types of rules:

Internal rules are rules that a player establishes for herself and polices internally. Internal rules are often present in character interpretation decisions: In *Celestra* each player was provided with two alternate examples of character psychology that players could follow or ignore. For instance Major Darlington could be played as a parental "humanitarian", a visionary "seeker", or the player could come up with her own interpretation.

Social rules are intangible, inexact rules we socially agree on, but that are hard to codify or validate. For example, other players might frown on players who try to win too hard, or who confuse the morals of a character with those of the player. Social rules tend to be unwritten, but they can sometimes be seen in player instructions: "You are not your character. Full stop. You will not be held responsible for any of the actions your character performs on the *Celestra*."

Formal rules are the codified rules that govern gameplay, like the ones in board game rulebooks. When a Nordic larper speaks about a larp "with no rules", she almost always refers to lack of formal rules. *Celestra* had a some formal rules, such as: "During *Take the Celestra*, the first episode, you can only be injured by external effects like radiation, electrical blowouts, etc."

External regulation: Legislation and other regulation of the world outside the game is central for street larps, and important for other kinds of games as well. In *Celestra* rules, as a last resort the players "will still have to answer to Swedish law and sane, off-game consensus".

Materially embodied rules are formal rules that have been embodied into brute facts for the purpose of play. For instance, a boffer sword can be crafted according to the specification given by game organizers. In *Celestra*, the rules of space combat were materially embodied in the computer system that kept track of everything from fuel levels to damage points. Software is a matter of brute fact just as hardware is.

Brute circumstances: All play takes place in the material world governed by brute circumstances ranging from environmental conditions to laws of nature. Although these things are not rules in themselves, the players' interactions with them are, to some extent, determined by rules. It was cold on *Celestra* because it was played in winter on a cold museum destroyer. Brute coldness was not a rule, but a direct consequence of the game institution being established in a cold place.

As a further complication, the above rules can also exist *within* the diegetic reality. If there is a card game of *Triad* going on in the officer's mess, the players might subscribe to a diegetic social rule forbidding you from taking too much time to play your turns. The rules are diegetic formal rules in the sense than breaking them is merely a diegetic offense, and punished merely by diegetic sanctions. Although *Triad* was originally presented in the fictional universe of *Battlestar Galactica*, it is fully

possible to play it in the context of ordinary life as well.

This analysis shows that even the larps advertised as having no rules are highly structured social activities. This is necessary for a large number of players to be able to focus on the substance of the game in a coherent manner. If the various rules of the process are broken, the game starts to resemble a surrealist improvised performance.

Magic Circle of Larp

Social interactions are precarious and dependent on a large number of factors. This is even more true when those interactions take place in the context of specific constitutive rules, such as roleplaying. If play is exposed to non-playing outsiders, it often suffers or even collapses. Thus, when people play a game, they tend to do so within a clearly defined space and time. Authors such as Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen have called that space the *magic circle of gameplay* — a more-or-less metaphorical area within which play prevails.

The magic circle is an attractive idea, because it is often clearly discernible even in the brute reality. It can take many shapes: For example, it can be a court specifically set apart for play (e.g. a tennis court), a zone that emerges because people play in there (a flash mob taking over a park), an area with material residue produced in play (a sand castle), or a small personal zone formed between a player and her game (like when playing computer games). The boundaries of the magic circle can be physical, social or barely discernible, and they can be exact or inexact. Sometimes a player leaving the area steps outside the game, sometimes she loses, and yet sometimes she may enter it freely again.

The importance of the magic circle comes from the fact that when we enter one, we are given to understand that the people in this area, doing this thing, at this moment, have agreed on some constitutive rules that change the meaning of what we see. This change in constitutive rules may have ethical and even legal consequences: When a player punches another in the face in a *boxing* ring, the punch counts as a legal game move, but giving a hug might be grounds for disqualification.

The Nordic larp scene is often very careful about its magic circles. Many larps subscribe to the *360° ideal*, in which everything the players see in the brute reality should count as something diegetic in an indexical or convincingly iconic fashion. A forest is a credible environment for a fantasy larp, and team of *The Monitor Celestra* spent considerable effort in transforming HMS *Småland* into a monitor-class vessel in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe.

Contemporary games played out in the open can eschew the entire idea of a magic circle, as the modern world provides perfect scenography in itself. Diegesis construction in such *pervasive larps* is largely based on indexical signs: Streets, buildings and outsiders represent themselves in the game. Pervasive larps are in constant interaction with their environment, as meaning endogenous to the larp spills out to the outside world, and random things from the outside world spill into the game. The fact that outsiders are unaware of the constitutive rules of a pervasive larp may lead to undesirable conflicts or ethical problems: If a player pulls out a gun replica on the street, the bystanders unaware of the playful context of the act are unlikely to assume that it is a quality icon of a gun, but rather call the police.

For the people aware of the context of the game — either because they can discern a magic circle, or because they have been informed of the game — the game provides a powerful *alibi* for the duration of the play. Because players are expected to count as their characters during the game, they may portray evil acts without being held accountable for them after the game. It is not me deciding to airlock another player in an illegal court-martial, but Major Darlington doing so to a mutineer character.

However, things are not as simple as they might seem: Even though the constitutive rules dictate that X counts as Y in the context C, that does not nullify the fact that X still counts as X outside that context. A player attracted to another player may approach him more safely in the context of larp, under the pretense that it is her character who is attracted to him. After the larp there might be a need to discuss things through and figure out how much of the attraction was merely diegetic.

The alibi is a necessary fiction for larp. It is necessary, because we could not larp well if we were not able to pretend to believe that we are our characters during the game. But it is a fiction, since sometimes we *are* held responsible for our actions during the larp — no matter what we agree beforehand. The *Celestra* rule that "[y]ou will not be held responsible for any of the actions your character performs on the *Celestra*" was a necessary but untrue generalization.

Roleplay as Performance

To recap, social institutions such as roleplaying games are built out of constitutive rules. Roleplaying is possible, because we can agree on our own constitutive rules and determine how things count as other things in that part of social reality often called "fiction". We use rules to structure the process where we create diegeses in interaction, and although everyone's diegesis is different, the play proceeds as long as they are equifinal. And we tend to do so in a magic circle — a space and time set apart from the ordinary life for purposes of following our artificial rules.

We do all this in order to experience our own diegeses.

This focus on one's own experience gives rise to what is sometimes called the *first person audience*. The aesthetic totality of the larp for one player is composed of her thoughts, emotions and interpretations of the game. We do not enlist on the *Celestra* in order to watch each other performing officers and scientists and refugees in space, as an audience of a theatre piece might. Instead we go there to experience being, doing and feeling in that world. This makes roleplaying an unusual form of expression, where the creator is also the primary audience of her own performance, and the diegesis she builds is her primary object of appreciation.

In most roleplaying games, players get different information regarding the state of the game, both incidentally and through intentional design decisions. Many games are based on secret knowledge given to players in private, but especially in larps this happens incidentally all the time: When a helmsman requests an emergency FTL jump on the bridge, she has little idea of what happens in the engine room where the crewmen crank reactors up to dangerous levels.

In larp debriefs this becomes evident. It seems that most players feel a pressing need to share their experiences with their fellow players after the game. This is where the larp is retroactively *narrativized*: Players build narratives out of events that transpired during the game, as a way of sorting out their experiences. Those narratives may or may not correspond with the stories possibly planned out by the game masters before the game.

The function of the narrativization process is to build a complete picture from the fragmented diegeses: Perhaps the engineers want to tell the helmsman about the lethal radiation that engulfed the engine room while preparing for the emergency jump, while the helmsman may want to share her experiences from the bridge at the same time.

After the larp ends, very little is left of the social reality of the larp. Memories, narratives and documents created during play persist, but the game itself is gone. Thus, larp is an *ephemeral* form of art. We cannot access larp as a whole while it happens, because it happens in all participants' minds at the same time, and we cannot access it afterwards, because it no longer exists.

No story can properly do justice to what happened to 120 players during the game, and the stories told by participants tend to be contradictory. We may have photos that represent the material reality of the game, but even if everything is recorded on video from all possible angles, those videos can never capture the internal processes of diegesis creation experienced by the players. Even the stories told of larp do not accurately represent the game, as our understanding of events changes in the process of narrativization.

The Value of Theory

Many roleplayers are opposed to theoretical jargon such as the terminology introduced above. Of course, using long words is not a value in itself.

First, conceptual understanding brings clarity to analytical thinking. Understanding that "diegesis" is shorthand for "my understanding of what happened in the game" makes it less likely to make the mistake of thinking that everyone would have an identical understanding of a scene in a larp.

Second, well-defined concepts bring precision to analytic expression. For example, referring to the idea of narrativization in a text makes it explicit that the writer refers to narratives as things constructed by participants after the game — instead of, say, meaning something larpwrights prepare before the game and try to convey through it.

Ultimately only the test of time determines the value of a conceptual framework. Concepts become valuable tools only when adopted by other theorists and practitioners.

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Mike Pohjola

Autonomous Identities

Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities

Once upon a time Nordic larp theory was discussed in print only in a magazine called Panclou. It was edited by Johanna Koljonen and combined theory and rumors with the aesthetic of a badly photocopied fanzine.

Since Panclou was the only non-digital medium available, many early texts appeared there. The texts proved important, but the medium wasn't respectable enough for academic use. Markus Montola and (Panclou second-in-command) Jaakko Stenros wanted to remedy this with the 2004 Solmukohta book Beyond Role and Play. *They wanted to create an academic tradition of larp analysis and larp theory, and many of the articles in the journal had to follow academic standards. This is one of them, and at the behest of the editors, includes a definition of "eläytyminen" — character immersion.*

I originally wrote the phrase "inter-immersion" on a napkin in Johanna Koljonen's living room. She later scanned the napkin, and published the result in Panclou. That's not something you can refer to in an academic context, but this is.

Montola and Stenros have both become serious game scholars, and have succeeded in making larp theory respectable.

— Mike Pohjola

The concept of immersion has been one of the hot potatoes in Nordic role-playing discussion. In this paper I question the necessity of character for immersion and argue that interaction is a trivial concept in defining role-playing. I compare the Turku, Meilahti and Post-Bjorneborgan Schools in regards to the concept of character and immersion. I explore the impact of perceived realities in achieving immersion and the effect of immersion on gaming reality. I also compare larps with Temporary Autonomous Zones, and attempt to see what is necessary for the two to become one.

The character immersion that role-players in general, and the Turku School in particular, have been trying to achieve is impossible. It is an ideal based on a faulty premise of character that originates with traditional fiction and that cannot be applied to immersive, immediated artforms like role-playing. Likewise, the emphasis on interactivity is trivial and unnecessary.

Role-players like to think they can be their characters and that their characters are individuals independent from the players. Yet they can never achieve "complete immersion" and feel inferior for this inability to perform. The problem is seeing the character as another person instead of a method for accessing the larp.

This essay is written partly as an attempt to update and post-modernise the ideas of the *Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 1999), specifically those concerning character and immersion. When the Turku Manifesto is mentioned, it should be read in this light. This article will hopefully help explain the original Turku Manifesto and develop the ideas presented there, as well as those presented in other articles I've written and the two "opposing" schools; the Meilahti School and their model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003), and the multi-tier immersion theory by the Post-Bjorneborgian School (Harviainen 2003). This article is in part an attempt at a synthesis between these three different schools of thought and an attempt to elaborate the potentially revolutionary nature of role-playing.

Immersion

According to the *Meilahti Model*, the relationship between the player and the character is very simple: "A player is a participant who assumes said roles [that form the character] within the diegetic frame." The internal processes and interpretations of the player are for the game as a whole until they are expressed and become part of the diegetic frame. Before that they are merely "individual narrative readings". (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003.)

Compared to the Meilahti Model, the Manifesto of the Turku School presents a very modernist view of character and immersion. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that seeing self as narrative is the essential part of identity creation. The Turku Manifesto saw this the opposite way: that character identity can be created by seeing the narrative as the self. In other words, a player can become the character after reading the character's written description.

The Turku Manifesto focuses on the process of immersion, or internally becoming a character. "Role-playing is immersion ("eläytyminen") to an outside consciousness ("character") and interacting with its surroundings". According to the Turku Manifesto, it is precisely immersion, coupled with interactivity, that defines role-playing. (Pohjola 1999.)

Every participant shares what happens, using immersion and interpretation to create an entirely unique portrayal of the events for themselves – a subjective diegesis. Markus Montola writes:

> Many people, such as Pohjola (1999) and Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002), use diegesis to mean an objective truth of the game world. I believe that understanding a diegesis as a subjective truth proves more accurate and fruit-

ful. Every participant constructs his or her diegesis when playing, the crucial process of role-playing being the interaction of these diegeses. The difference of players' diegeses is essentially larger than the difference of different interpretations of a movie diegesis.

[...]

The contents of a role-playing diegesis and a movie diegesis are different. When it comes to role-playing, it's important to understand that a diegesis is much more than a fictional world with characters running around. There is a lot happening in the heads of the participants constructing the diegeses. A lot of what we imagine into our diegeses never comes up; single character's personal plans or well-hidden emotions for example. They exist only in the diegesis of that player, though the he may communicate them to others' diegeses, either by diegetic or non-diegetic means. (Montola 2003)

Hamlet's Monologues

The larp *Hamlet* employed some experimental methods. Perhaps the most important of these was the use of monologues to convey the mood to the characters and players. This method made brilliant use of the subjective diegeses of a larp.

The traditional role-playing would halt, and the characters (not just the players!) would gather around a stage and observe one of the key characters, like Hamlet or Claudius, speaking to themselves. This was used to represent each character's inner monologue. It worked to set the mood of the game, and also to illustrate the inner workings of each characters minds. The characters had been constructed in such a way that each monologue was relevant for every character, but in completely different ways.

The most famous monologue, Hamlet's "To be or not to be", often understood to deal with Hamlet's pondering between life and death or action and inaction, was brought to life by dozens of simultaneous interpretations.

> When Pelle, who plays the evil king Claudius' unswervingly loyal servant, hears the "to be or not to be" monologue, it speaks of the difficulty of being a good servant for an evil master. For the aging diva Perdita it becomes a reminder of how short life is, and drives her to drunken dissipations with a one-eyed apothecarist. (Hamlet, the larp)

The event is the same for all the participants, but is interpreted in completely different ways. This, of course, happens with all art. With larps it is made different, and perhaps more focused, through characters that give the context for the interpretation.

The Many Faces of Immersion

Larps contain four aspects: the characters, the setting, the events, and the mechanics (Pohjola 2003c). This is roughly analogous to the four way model presented in the Manifesto of the Turku School, where the players are divided respectively into immersionists, simulationists, dramatists and gamists (Pohjola 1999). The classic *Threefold Model* (see Kim 1998) and the later *Three Way Model* (Bøckman 2003) were similar with one lacking immersionists and the other simulationists.

J. Tuomas Harviainen provides another way to look at things by proposing that there are three kinds of immersion: Character Immersion, Reality Immersion and Narrative Immersion. According to him, every role-player can be divided into one of eight categories according to how they immerse. Not immersing on any level would make the role-player a Powergamer, immersing in the Narrative only would make one an Actor-Player, and so on (Harviainen 2003). These two categories are more or less similar with what the Turku Manifesto calls Gamist and Dramatist.

The Fundament Player (Character and Reality Immersion) is both the Immersionist and the Simulationist of the Turku Manifesto. Of the five other categories Harviainen sees two (only Reality Immersion, or no Reality Immersion) as transitory phases. The three that remain are the Simulator (Reality and Narrative Immersion), the Escapist (only Character Immersion), and the Extension player (all kinds of simulation).

Harviainen's division is very useful for game masters, but differs from the Turku Manifesto in not condemning Narrative Immersion. In Harviainen's terms, the Turku School propagates the importance of Reality Immersion and Character Immersion. However, the Turku School still admits to two kinds of role-playing, immersionist and simulationist. The theory is that the immersionist experiences what the character experiences, while the simulationist only pretends to, logically deducing what the character would do next. In another article, I introduce another way to deal with these two kinds of playing with Aristotle's concepts of ekstatikoi and euplastoi:

> What is translated here as "a strain of madness" actually means an ability to be taken over by your work, to immerse yourself into it... to "eläytyä". "Taking the mould of any character" was originally the Greek word euplastoi, and means thinking logically about the characters and situations, and thus simulating the outcome. "Lifted out of his proper self", on the other hand is ekstatikoi, which is writing spontaneously, in inspiration. (Pohjola 2001b.)

To make it short, immersion is inspired and natural, simulation is conscious and forced. However, something greater can emerge from both, as I will show later.

Pretending to Believe to Remember

Immersion is often defined as being in character or becoming the character. This is a very simplistic way of putting it. By immersing into the reality of another person, the player willingly changes her own reality. The player pretends to be somebody else.

But more than *pretending* to be the character, the player *pretends to believe she is* the character. It is this self-induced state which makes it all so cool.

The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. To more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember. The more she pretends to believe to remember, the more she starts to really believe to remember, and really remember to believe, and really remember and really believe. And she pretends to forget she is just pretending. This is what Richard Schechner (2002) calls "pretending belief". The need to immerse in fictitious realities is what Jane McGonigal calls the Pinocchio Effect:

> Players were given an opportunity to reflect on the longing of the virtual to be real. The generation of this desire, and the concomitant consciousness of the impossibility of its ever being achieved, is what I call the "Pinocchio Effect." Pervasive games, at their heart, are the dream of the virtual to be real. And if pervasive games are the dream of the virtual to be real, then they are the dream of the players for the real to be virtual. [...]
>
> I would like to propose that this drive to discover real life problems in direct correspondence to fictional play is not strange or delusional, but rather a perfect illustration of what digital theorist Pierre Levy identifies as a fundamental aspect of our experience of contemporary virtuality. (McGonigal 2003b.)

By understanding a character as diegetic roles, the diegesis as the character's perception of the reality of the game world, and the player as the participant of the role-playing game, immersion can be de-

fined like this: *Immersion is the player assuming the identity of the character by pretending to believe her identity only consists of the diegetic roles* (See Stuart Hall (1996) for more exact definitions of identity and role).

The relationship of the character and the diegetic frame is an interesting one. It is impossible to define if a character exists within the diegetic frame or whether the diegetic frame only exists within the diegesis that is created by the character. The question is related to that of reality existing without an intelligence to perceive it. In other words, by immersing the player loses some of her own roles and assumes some new ones, leaving her only roles that can exist within the diegetic frame. In effect, the player transforms into the character. This process of immersion takes the player from the assumed objective reality into the diegetic frame, or conversely takes reality from the player into the character. Often the role of the player is not immediately lost, but diminishes and eventually disappears as immersion deepens.

Note that the kind of immersion the Manifesto of the Turku School promotes, "to think, experience and feel through the character" is made meaningless by further study, as it assumes that behind a character, an objective identity uses the character as a context, a lens to see the game through.

Interaction

The Meilahti Model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) claims that it is impossible to role-play alone. The Turku Manifesto argues that it is entirely possible. The argument for both is that role-playing should include interactivity. The Meilahti Model does not count interaction with the environment – the implication is that the diegesis exists only when transmitted through other players. The Turku Manifesto says the opposite – anything the character senses is part of the diegesis, and therefore it is possible to interact with it. And thus, in larps where no game master is present, it is possible and even commonplace to larp alone.

Both theories hold interaction as a key element in defining role-playing. The Turku Manifesto says role-playing is immersion into character and interacting with the character's surroundings. The Meilahti Model says that "a role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework". The character's surroundings are practically synonymous to the specified diegetic framework. The two main differences are the lack of immersion in Meilahti and the lack of the necessity of the other players in Turku. Both say interaction is essential. However, it is not.

Interaction is not defined in either of these articles. Greg Costikyan explains interactivity in relation to game design by saying a game is interactive by its nature: "The outcome of the game will differ depending on your decision. The game interacts with the players (and the players with each other), changing state as they play. [...] That's true of every game. If it isn't interactive, it's a puzzle, not a game" (Costikyan 2002). This makes sense in sentences like "games are an interactive medium," because that is a simple way to explain the difference between a computer game and a computer animation, or indeed any passive medium. Interactive media interact with and are interpreted by the audience while passive media are merely interpreted by the audience. Active media like theatre or music are difficult to define in this regard. I will later explain on the concept of mediation in relation to this.

Costikyan sees a game as something that exists separately from the players and can interact with them. This definition of interactivity does not fit role-playing, however, as a role-playing game is not an object that can exist without players. Interactivity is a useful term when talking about the plot structure of role-playing games, which is

why they are often called “interactive dramas”.

The difference between interaction and interpretation is difficult to pinpoint. However, any theatre performance is automatically interactive. The audience interacts with the actors, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other, the actors with the props, and so on. In some big theatre houses, the feeling of interactivity might not be present for the audience, but the potential is always there. Any member can at any time comment loudly on anything happening on the stage, and the actors will have to react to this, even if that reaction is pretending not to have heard it. Simply by experiencing a live performance the audience interacts with it – an indifferent audience affects the performers differently from an excited audience, and as a result physically sees a different performance. This is similar with all active media where the art is performed live. With passive media, like literature or cinema, the audience reaction does not affect the actual media product, except contextually.

A human being cannot choose whether to be interactive or not; A human being is interactive by default. It is pointless, then, to say that a role-playing game participant must interact for the game to be interactive. As long as the role-playing game has even a single human being, it has interaction. Similarly, a character (assuming it is relatively human) is automatically interactive and in interaction with its reality, i.e. the diegesis of the game.

A computer game might be called an “interactive drama” if the player gets to make some choices in the narrative, usually by selecting her own path through a story tree. Sometimes a computer game has an open-ended story-world, in which there is a practically infinite amount of randomly generated events the player can keep encountering for as long as she likes. In these cases, the difference between interaction and interpretation is the clear: manipulating sensory information (reading, seeing, and hearing the words, images and sounds shown by the computer) versus the interpretation of that information in the players mind. For example, the different shapes of Tetris would be information resulting from interaction, but the player seeing New York skyline in them would be interpretation.

Such a clear difference does not exist in role-playing games as the diegesis is entirely subjective. Sensory information first interpreted by the character to form the subjective diegesis, and only then are both the diegesis and the sensory information interpreted by the player to form the interpretation. If the player achieves full immersion and suspension of disbelief, the player will only interpret the diegesis and leave the interpretation of sensory information to the character.

Immediacy

Role-playing games are often falsely called an interactive medium or interactive art. While not untrue as such, it is a trivial concept since all art and all media are interactive – not necessarily when they are perceived or experienced, but definitely when they are created. If role-playing games could be recorded or observed from the outside without participation, there obviously would be nothing interactive about them. What sets them apart is precisely that they can only be experienced as they are created. Creation of any of art is a constant circle of action, interpretation and reaction, being interactive, interpretational and expressive at the same time.

Media can be divided into three loose categories: passive, active and interactive. Passive media are recorded, and the audience cannot affect the media product as such, only the context and the interpretation. Passive media include cinema, literature, recorded music and the like. Active media are sometimes called live arts and include theatre performances, poetry recitations, and concerts. In active media, the experience is less mediated, and the audience has theoretical possibilities of interacting with the performers – sometimes so much that

the division to performers and audience can be hazy, like in karaoke. Interactive media are media in which the audience must take part in the performance for it to continue, such as a computer game or hypertext.

The fourth, transcendent category is "immediate art", art that is direct in that it is experienced as it is created and has no use for the division between performers and audience. Role-playing games are definitely immediate, but the definition can also encompass parties, communal storytelling and even improvised music jams.

An outside audience cannot understand a role-playing game, although it can seem like an interesting performance. Role-playing games take place in the present moment and are transmitted directly from person to person. This makes them immediate:

> All experience is mediated — by the mechanisms of sense perception, mentation, language, etc. — & certainly all art consists of some further mediation of experience. However, mediation takes place by degrees. Some experiences (taste, smell, sexual pleasure) are less mediated than others (reading a book, looking through a telescope, listening to a record). Some media, especially "live" arts such as dance, theater, musical or bardic performances, are less mediated than others, such as TV, CDs, Virtual Reality. [...] Therefore, as artists & "cultural workers" who have no intention of giving up activity in our chosen media, we nevertheless demand of ourselves an extreme awareness of immediacy, as well as the mastering of some direct means of implementing this awareness as play, immediately (at once) & immediately (without mediation). (Bey 1994.)

That is to say, the interactivity of role-playing games is not relevant, but their immediacy is. I have written briefly about larp as an immediate medium in another article:

> Live-action role-playing games as events lack aspects of traditional media, although characters, through which the expression happens, can be considered media. Live-action role-playing games are also bodily and all-encompassing works, in which each movement, sound, taste, smell, touch and even thought are part of the work. However, immediatism's understanding of play is even larger. Whereas free time is an emptiness that must be filled with entertainment, play is its opposite – a self-fulfilling and self-rewarding thing. Play is anarchy, while free time, entertainment and art are societal. (Pohjola 2003c)

Role-Playing

Since there is no use saying role-playing is interactive, the definition needs to be revised. Simply taking interactivity out of the definitions, or replacing it with immediatism, would not work. According to the Meilahti Model, immersion without interaction ("alone") is daydreaming. According to the Dogma 99, "larp is action, not literature" (Fatland & Wingård 2003). In a way, both are right. Immersion without action is daydreaming and can result in or be the result of a narrative.

This is where the surroundings, or the diegetic frame, come back in the picture. The role-player must immerse, or take on the roles that exist within the diegetic frame. This means that for the duration of the role-playing game, the character must exist within the diegetic frame. The character will automatically sense and be sensed by the diegetic frame. The diegetic frame can contain other characters, or it can sense and be sensed as unintelligent or inanimate surroundings. (In this case the sensory process can be simpler, like grass bending when a weight is put on it.) The diegetic frame and the character(s) can be presented physically with live-action role-playing methods, verbally with tabletop role-playing methods, or with several

other methods like text, drawing, puppets, miniatures or digital avatars.

It is also conceivable to role-play in a diegetic frame that is strictly personal, that takes place inside the role-player's head. The Meilahti Model labels this daydreaming, even though the required "interaction" is there – between the character and the diegetic frame, both existing inside the player's imagination. There is also nothing stopping the same role-player from creating several different characters that interact together within the diegetic frame. This method is often used by writers and tabletop role-playing game masters:

> Sometimes, when you play a character long enough, explore the character's feelings and attitudes and memories, that character becomes a "real" individual, a new role inside your head. [...] When writing a scene with many characters in drama or prose, or when gamemastering a tabletop role-playing game, the same phenomenon occurs in an exaggerated form. All the characters, or the NPCs start to live inside your head. (Pohjola 2001b)

Most likely the character's presence in the diegetic frame is not only about sensing, although it can be. Even unconscious, the character is present in the diegetic frame and interacts with it. Of course, the role-playing game often becomes more interesting when the character's actions become more meaningful.

Theoretically, a player does not know when her character is communicating with a character played by another player and when simply with a previously created part of the diegetic frame. In larps, the players' characters usually stand out, but not always. If a character is listening to voices in a protected space in a dark room, it is impossible to know whether the voices are coming from other characters or a pre-recorded tape. For this reason, other characters are simply a part of the diegetic frame, and interaction with them is no more valuable or "real" than interaction with a computer or a tree, although often more interesting.

Considering that existing (and as a result, interaction) within the diegetic frame is a part of immersion, I define role-playing like this: *Role-playing is immediated character immersion*.

Inter-Immersion

Pretending to believe leads to real belief. Pretending to believe you are someone else leads to immersion, to believing you are someone else. How exactly it leads there happens when the diegesis enhances this belief instead of the feeling of pretence. This is what I call inter-immersion:

> "Another important difference is the relationship between immersion and interaction. For Dogmatists the interaction, what happens during the game, is "the reality of the LARP." For Turkuists, that reality exists only inside the head of each player. Of the thesis and anti-thesis can be formulated a synthesis: The reality of LARP comes from the collective experience of immersion shared and strengthened through interaction. The reality of LARP comes from inter-immersion!" (Pohjola 2001a)

Back then, I defined inter-immersion as a state achieved when one or more immersed players interact with each other and their surroundings. In the term, interaction is seen as happening between players as well as between the surroundings, in short, interaction between the character and the diegetic frame. Thus, inter-immersion can be explained without mentioning interaction. Inter-immersion is a phenomenon strengthening the identity of the character (as opposed to the identity of the player), which occurs when the player is immersed inside a believable diegesis. Inter-immersion can also help a simulating player to become immersive, and the lack of it can lead an immersive player to become simulative. The chances for inter-immersion

can be enhanced by anything from good propping to exciting events.

Inter-immersion is the recursive cycle of immersion: staying in character helps the player to stay in character. Seeing other characters, acting within the diegetic frame, observing diegetic reactions, experiencing the environment, these all help in enhancing the player's immersion. (They can also be considered as tools for constructing subjective diegeses (Montola 2003)). When everything a character does enhances the believability of the diegetic frame, and everything in the diegetic frame enhances the identity of the character (as opposed to that of the player), the player enters the positive feedback loop known as inter-immersion.

Usually beginning on the second day of multi-day larps, a player's memory starts helping inter-immersion. At that point, the memory is full of things done as the character, things pertaining to the fiction of the larp. When the character sits by idly and the mind starts to wander, it does not stumble into things outside the fiction, as it only finds memories that enhance the immersion.

As the player reaches the inter-immersive state, she starts to forget she is just pretending to believe it is all real. She acts as if she really believes the diegesis, and when everybody else does the same and reacts to each other's beliefs (instead of the pretensions), they forget they are just pretending and start to really believe.

Temporariness

The realities of larp, the diegetic frames, are not only limited physically to be within the "objective reality", but they are temporary as well. They are called into existence at the beginning of the larp and are put back at the end. Therefore, the diegeses of a larp are temporary realities.

Characters share and do not share this problem. Characters are temporary identities that the players assume for the duration of the larp. Without a character, a player cannot access the diegesis. Yet, a typical character is a part of the player, a part of the player's identity. According to the Meilahti School, a character contains some but rarely all of the roles the player's assumed objective identity contains:

> There is no need to differentiate between the roles the player assumes within the diegetic frame and the roles assumed outside of it (in fact "player" is a role as well). [...]
>
> A character is a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional "story of self" binding the separate, disconnected roles together. (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003)

Sometimes a player participates in a larp but does not want to or is not able to play her character as written, but to form a diegesis of the larp, to participate, the player needs some diegetic roles to identify with. Juhana Pettersson comments on poorly designed larps:

> In these games, the character [description] provides in-game context but little more. Often the only way to go is ignoring the character as written. But if I'm not playing the character [as written], or being myself, then who am I? In a genre game, the is easy, because I've acquired a set of mannerisms suitable for the style. It may not be a character [designed by the game masters], but it looks like one, if you haven't seen me play too often. (Pettersson 2003)

Pettersson has a selection of archetypal roles which allow him to play in most larps. This is true with most role-players, who default in playing one of very few characters archetypal to them if not given enough incentive to do otherwise. Typecasting often enhances these archetypes.

In this way a player can exist within the diegetic frame through small changes in her identity. The opposite can also happen; The character can exist outside the diegetic frame, in the "objective reality", through small changes in the way reality is perceived. When the player conjures up her character's identity and enters gaming reality, she starts to see the "objective reality" as a diegetic frame, even if not the diegetic frame indigenous to the character. In this state, which is often briefly induced subconsciously, the character will start to think of the "objective reality" in terms of the game: "If vampires exist, then that means the invasion of Iraq is an Assamite plot!" This phenomenon is what Jane McGonigal describes as gaming reality:

> Elsewhere, I have described in detail the phenomenon I call "gaming reality", in which fans of pervasive play approach real life problems such as unsolved crimes, the prevention of terrorism and political graft as if it were an immersive game. (McGonigal 2003b)

She refers to her earlier article *This is not a game*, in which she writes:

> It is far from clear at this early point in the genre that the astonishing effectiveness of immersive gamers in a collective play environment can transfer to the real world as succesfully as their game-play mindset. The objective impact of immersive play, we might say, has not yet caught up with the subjective changes produced by immersive aesthetics." (McGonigal 2003a)

In short, gaming reality takes place when the roles of the character are invoked consciously or subconsciously outside the diegetic frame. Often the identities of the character and the player exist simultaneously in these situations and can even have internal dialogue.

Making Up Rules

All games are played according to some kind of structure, typically rules (Costikyan 2002). The players agree to act in a certain way within the limits of the game and expect the others to do the same. These rules differ from the rules existing in the players' everyday lives in the sense that they are temporary. The players start to follow the rules when the game begins, and when the game ends, they stop following the rules. If all goes well, they do not have to think about the rules or that it is just a game, because it is so interesting that they do not want to.

Ice hockey is a good example of this. Grown men skating as fast as they can to move a piece of plastic to a specific area. Seems pointless, yet it is immensely popular. This is because the players and the audience do not concentrate on the fact that it is a game but on the reality within the game – whichever team gets the puck to the other team's goal the most times wins. Wilful suspension of disbelief makes the game feel relevant even if it is not. But when it feels relevant, it becomes relevant.

In real life, people are expected to always follow the rules, and even when they break some of them, they follow some larger rules that deal with breaking the rules. The matrix of these rules makes up our society. Most of them are arbitrary, but still necessary.

According to McGonigal's ideas about gaming reality, when a player learns a new set of rules, it is natural to want to apply it to other things than what it is intended for. The difference between live-action role-playing games and other games is that they make gaming reality work. Hockey sticks will not be of much help on a first date or in a political debate, but one can experience and rehearse both situations in a live-action role-playing game. I touched this subject in Panclou:

> Shamanistic ritual is LARP applied to religion. We have characters inside our

> heads. New ones join when we read a good character description and play the character for a while. They are not physical people, nor are they spirits. They are individuals inside our heads. Usually, for those that the modern world considers to be sane, those individuals are not as dominant as what we consider to be our true selves. Sometimes they step up, though, and we get a glimpse of what a character of ours would do in our place. (Pohjola 2001b)

In live-action role-playing games, the game master makes up rules for the society. She can decide on a new language, new style of clothing, or change the laws entirely. She temporarily changes one set of arbitrary rules to another.

This can be compared with Hakim Bey's anarchistic concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ): In a TAZ, willing participants agree on a new set of rules that are in effect within the Zone. The Zone is independent of any outside state or law, and is supposedly dissolved as soon as it is discovered by the establishment:

> The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it.
>
> [...]
>
> And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that "anarchist dream" of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now. (Bey 1985)

Since live-action role-playing games are so similar to the Temporary Autonomous Zones, creating larp societies enables and empowers us to comment on real-life societies and even change them. Larpers are not doomed to play in temporary pocket realities (no matter how autonomous) inside the "objective reality", but they can change their reality for good. Identities can change and so can realities. I will elaborate on this further when I talk about the nature of diegeses.

Learning from History

There is a pattern in the history of games that helps understand gaming reality. Modern role-playing games evolved from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which evolved from complex strategy games, which in turn evolved from simple strategy games.

There is a pattern, and a very clear one when you know where to look. Each new generation of games is less abstract. Where *Go*is about capturing and re-capturing land, *Chess* is about a war between two nations, *Chainmail* is about commanding armies in battle and Dungeons & Dragons is about directing a singular adventurer in a dungeon, modern role-playing games are about acting as any individuals in any setting.

Where the chessboard with its 64 squares abstractly represent a battlefield, in Chainmail the players use a miniaturized version of an actual battlefield. Where in Dungeons & Dragons the players use a dungeon to provide a very limited environment for action, in modern role-playing games the players can use any environment they want to. The games seem to become less abstract all the time.

The same development can be seen in computer games. When using the computer as a platform has more or less reached its limitations, the games will move off that platform (such as pervasive reality games) or will start to include that platform (such as games where the computer is just the character's interface to the game world, like in *Alpha Centauri* or *In Memoriam*).

It is "gaming reality" taking place in reverse. Players accept the rules and reality of the game, and subsequently start to see their own reality in the same terms. Per-

ceiving reality as a game and game as reality is very difficult when the game is so abstract that game actions are simply not applicable to real-life situations. As an episode of *Futurama* phrased it: "Not all things can be solved with chess, Deep Blue, and one day you will learn that."

It is entirely possible, even easy, to see "objective reality" as a role-playing game. Making the games more complex and less abstract has made gaming reality stronger and more fulfilling. The next logical step is to lose the barrier separating games and reality once and for all.

Diegesis: A Temporary Reality

As pretended belief becomes real belief, subjective diegesis turns into subjective reality. This is only temporary, however, as after the larp, a participant first stops pretending to believe and then stops believing. The subjective reality returns close to what it was before, and the diegetic frame returns from being reality to being fiction again.

In role-playing games, the diegesis is temporarily the participant's reality and the character her identity. Role-playing provides a way for a participant to lose some of her roles and to adopt new ones.

Larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday identity and the social expectations reflected on that identity. Similarly, larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday reality by providing methods for creating other realities inside and on top of the assumed objective reality.

As larps grow less abstract and more complex, they start to resemble not just fictitious realities, but also possible realities. They become Temporary Autonomous Zones in which the participants willingly live a different life. If the same happens with characters, they will start to resemble not just a fictitious identity but also a possible identity – perhaps like the player living in the TAZ.

I propose that all that is necessary for a Temporary Autonomous Zone to be created is for the participants to take on a *Temporary Autonomous Identity*. And what, indeed, are characters if not Temporary Autonomous Identities?

Characters and diegetic frames are temporary in the sense that they are not present all the time. However, gaming reality makes the lines between reality and game, character and player, fuzzier all the time. Though Bey says a TAZ must have a clear beginning and a clear end, I say we can carry the TAI (and the TAZ) with us all the time in our heads. More to the point, once we have immersed in the characters, we cannot get rid of them. Instead, we always have a Temporary Autonomous Identity with us, and that will set us free.

Conclusion

In role-playing games, the subjective diegeses are created through immersed interpretation. Pretending to believe that this diegesis is "real" becomes inter-immersion and hence enhances immersion. Inter-immersion and the diegesis together with the Pinocchio Effect make diegesis turn into objective reality, i.e. reality that is the game becomes temporarily real for the player that is the character.

Perceiving the subjective diegesis of a role-playing game as reality makes it increasingly easy to perceive reality as a subjective diegesis of a role-playing game. Reality becomes gaming reality. It is possible to act in the "objective reality" as one would in a larp.

Since it is possible to perceive reality as a larp, it is also possible to apply methods of larp creation into molding reality. Thus Temporary Autonomous Zones can be created, i.e. we can larp that our reality is different. Our character for a TAZ is a Temporary Autonomous Identity, one that lives

with different rules than we are expected to.

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Ulrik Lehrskov

My Name is Jimbo the Orc

Back in 2007, larp circles were trying to gain momentum in public culture and academic life by trying to build larp into a discipline. Public life needed to know this was serious business and academic life needed to know what it was, at all. The immediate intellectual battle was on how larps were described. This is harder than it seems, and larp circles were getting increasingly frustrated that any descriptive scheme invented was easily picked apart. With my background in the philosophy of science I knew this wasn't a unique case and that even natural sciences were — and are — struggling with description. Example: is light a wave or a particle? Are optics or mechanics the best descriptive scheme for light?

In a basic sense 'sciences' aren't the disciplines who found the one right *description of a corner of the world but the ones who found a* functional *description that allows them to do something: send rockets to the moon or do literary critique. As such my 'Jimbo' article was an attempt to suggest a downscaling from the agreed standard of finding 'right' descriptions of larp to simply finding, exploring and using any descriptive scheme that would lend itself to something useful or fun.*

— Ulrik Lehrskov-Schmidt

Kicking back some beers at the beach one late summer evening a few years back one of my friends wanted to introduce me to a suave looking fellow that had just joined our small camp-fire, complete with cooled drinks and Dylan guitar playing. I wasn't really in my chatty corner, just trying to squeeze the last drops of leisure out of my vacation, but my friend insisted. "He is really a nice guy" he said. "And a role-player, too". That settled it. I had to go talk to the guy. It is an almost sacred rule amongst role-players that we have to maintain some sort of secret connection or common identity by always gathering in small crowds, no matter the situation. I went over to him and introduced myself. I'd been told he'd just returned from a big German larp that I'd wanted to go to my-self, so I could at least ask him what I'd missed out on. Besides, he looked like a nice fellow. Blond hair and a smile. Clean, nice shirt. One of those blokes that can walk into a bar anywhere in the world and get that crucial first-glance acceptance by the regulars.

"Hi" I said, adding my name and referring to our mutual friend. "Hi" he returned, so far still in the green-zone of my social barometer "My name is Jimbo the orc". "What the fuck!", I thought, restraining all my face muscles to keep it secret from him that he'd just redefined my concept of 'bad first impressions'. But I was stuck there. Moving away from someone at a camp-fire cannot go unnoticed. Everyone will know that you got bored out or disliked whoever sat next to you and that is, per strange definition, a rude manoeuvre – no matter the behaviour of your company. So once you slap down you have to wait until you have to either piss, get a new drink or – if you are lucky – the smoke from the fire is trying to kill you. And that was at least 5 more minutes, so I decided to politely ignore his first remark and ask him about the German larp that I knew he'd been to. Bad move altogether.

He started jabbering about how he'd played this orc-character named Jimbo who had this really cool special cleave-move that the gamemasters had bestowed specifically on him because his latex-axe was the coolest one they'd ever seen and how he'd been all tangled up in these family intrigues in his orc group and how they'd totally wrecked the entire scenario by suicide charging the kings convoy on Saturday, because they were bored and hung over from drinking ouzo in their camp the night before with some really cute Goth-chick dark elves. Now I've been a role-player for almost twenty years, so I have highly acute survival tactics for these geek-sieges, but this guy was totally over the edge. And he even had on such a nice shirt. I tried vainly to ask him what the whole scenario had been about. How they had conducted the gameflow. How the characters had been written. How the city had been built. How the story had unfolded. What the mechanisms of the society was like. How the scenario had worked for the players. But all I ever got out of Jimbo was how his experience as the orc with great cleave had been. How his game had flowed. Why he had gone there. How his interaction was with his co-orcs. How his character was written and so on and so on. It still puzzles me how 4 pages of character can amount to nothing more but "Wow, what a cool axe. We are giving you GREAT CLEAVE, which is a +5 dam modifier" which apparently was what Jimbo had picked up. Oh, and that he was an orc.

No matter what and how I tried, all Jimbo could talk about was his own, subjective angle to the larp. How it had been for him. Hard pressed he told me that it had taken place in Germany near Hamburg, been for around 500 people and that the setting had cost around 200.000 euro to build. This still left me with a feeling that I'd never really heard anything about the scenario in and of itself. I had no feel of it. Nothing to discuss with him about it. He had talked, and talked, and talked and not once had he said anything that allowed me to respond in any meaningful manner – apart from asking more "How was that, then"-questions.

Saved by a full bladder I excused myself and got up, carefully not settling down next to Jimbo as I returned relieved from the dark. But the problem still kept puzzling me. When had I in fact, ever, heard a decent description of any larp, by any person, that allowed me to get a solid grasp on what had gone down, what the larp had been about and if I regretted not going there myself? Had I ever gotten such a description? It seemed to me not. Now some of my friends are professional writers, communicators and storytellers but even they have always digressed into the same dichotomy as Jimbo: either tell about hard, overarching facts about the scenario or dig deep into your own experience of play.

There have been plenty of attempts to define and describe role-playing on numerous theoretical levels. The activity of acting under the common assumption that you are someone else and interact with others that do the same is well described. This goes for several levels of play, ranging from what it means in a semiotic or dramaturgical sense to 'play a role' and what is happening on a social level when groups of role-players interact in larger plays. But all these theories aim at a description of role-playing as a type of action, and never the single larp as an actual event. Saying about the aforementioned German larp that it was 'a large group of people acting under a mutual, wordless assumption that they were all someone else, interacting in a large, constructed, social meta-structure, following a pre-generated narration in accordance with their pretended selves' gives me (nearly) absolutely no information about that specific larp. It gives me a lot of information about the type or nature of the activity that was going on, but – knowing that already – I'm left with no clue as to the actual feel, structure and story of the larp. How well it was played out. If there was an idea or a story, how it came across on a general, non-personal level.

We can easily make all such claims and analyses when we watch plays, go to the movies or read a book. We can criticize plot and structure, execution, language, length, story, narrational economy etc. But why can't we do this when it comes to larps? Why can't we, condensed in a single concept, make a literary analysis of a larp?

Well, the answer lies head on: because the larp is seen as a largely non-intentional happening. There are characters, background information, NPC contributors and all that, but at the end of the day anyone agrees that the main contribution to any particular larp comes from the players themselves. No matter how rail-roaded or tightly knit a plot is, the main content itself – the actual role-playing – is something that is brought to the larp by the players in their role of individual subjects. It is always *me* that is playing a specific role, and whatever is happening, I will always see my role-playing as largely attributable to myself. It is a personal experience that I create myself, strengthened and supported by my surroundings, who are in turn also creating an experience for themselves.

How could we talk about *the* Plot or *the* Structure of an actual larp, when we all know that these concepts only exist, in their capital sense, as something actualized by the subjective actions of several players on some open plot and structure laid out by the producers? How can we talk about Execution of the idea or story of a larp, when we all know that these things are not meant to happen in a strictly specific way, like in a book or a movie, actualized by the players as they see fit. Indeed, how can we even talk about Story with a capital 'S' in a larp, without using it as either a mere synonym for 'plot-outline' or as a term that bundles up the individual stories of the players, generated in interaction with the plot-outline.

And this is why Jimbo keeps jabbering on about his experience at the German larp. Because the main con-tent of the experience – the story – was something that he brought with him himself in his interaction with the setting provided by the producers of the larp. Hardly pressed, he tells me his

impression of this production as well, but it doesn't lie at the heart of his experience.

So what are we left with here? Does larp evade any literary analysis that tries to look at large perspectives, but not focus on the pre-made material, the actual, physical circumstances or the plot-outline? Can we not talk about *the* Story of a larp? Because if we can't talk about the story we have no hope of invoking any kind of literary analysis, complete with talks about structure, execution and economy.

It seems that the very heart of the matter, the individual story, prohibits any such literary or general analysis. But why is that really an obstacle? Just because we immediately recognize the personal experience of story as that intrinsic to role-playing in general, we are not as a result prohibited from drawing out a story-whole for us to talk about. We can't, however, hope to find this 'story-whole' by simply adding up all the smaller personal stories. We have to change perspective altogether and look beyond the subjective approach that is so inherent in role-playing, but so alien to literary analysis.

To find the larger story in a larp, we have to look at it and pretend that everything that happens is in some way intentionally composed and made by the producer(s). When Jimbo and his band of orcs attacks the king's convoy, we have to see it as not a group of individual players acting out their roles as they see fit, but as a narrative manoeuvre, well planned, orchestrated and set in motion by the author. They were *meant* to attack the convoy. And the kings' knights were *meant* to loose the battle in the way they did. Everything that happens in a scenario should be seen as coming from a united source of intentionality. Then, and only then, do we have access to a story that contains the whole larp, and not just a single character.

But isn't this cheating? Isn't this taking the role-playing out of the analysis of the larp? The very personal experience that constitutes it as what it is? Sure it is. Or rather, it is a way for us to ask questions of the larp that we otherwise could not. We forcedly see the larp as a single 'story-whole' and as a consequence can treat it momentarily as such while we try to interpret and explain what was happening.

On another level, this isn't cheating at all. In a way it is, in fact, a method of loyalty towards the main aspect of role-playing, namely story. If we do not perceive the larp as a 'story-whole' we are forced to talk about it in meta terms, explaining how the producers made characters, plot-outlines, setting etc., and how the players interacted into this pre-made frame. This is telling the story of the larp as a 'the-making-of'-story, not as the story in the larp itself.

To do that we need to invoke this story by allowing ourselves to see story features in the happenings that took place. Story features simply means that we allow ourselves to interpret and explain A in terms of B (i.e. the band of orcs attacked the king so that he couldn't return to find his queen in bed with her lover). Something happened because this allowed for something else to happen (or not happen), not because Jimbo thought it would be cool to do it so that he could get killed and go to the off-game zone and smoke cigarettes and eat junk-food.

Let us call this method the method of story attribution, since it attributes a single story to a large amount of events.

If we use this tool of story attribution we can start analyzing larps in a new way. We can talk about how well we thought the individual groups and people fitted together. How the events played out to form an interesting, overarching whole. How much time and activity that went into doing things that maybe didn't improve so much on the larp as a whole.

Of course the method of story attribution is not any sort of an exact science. It is devoid of any kind of truth. It is simply a tool which we can use to compare and order dif-

ferent events and types of events in a larp. Also it can be quite fun.

Taking the German larp as an example it is possible to interpret it as a mainly Marxist story, where the rise of the orcs are perceived as a symbolical commen-tary to the rise of the working class against a ruling aristocracy (i.e. they attacked the kings convoy). They seize the means of production (looted the corpses) and society as we knew it broke down. A criticism to this analysis could be to point out that no Marxist society was established in the course of this 'revolution', which must mean that the story is in reality a criticism of revolutionary tendencies, showing that they lead only to instability and anarchy.

Another interpretation of the German larp could be to see it as a clear tribute to the legacy of classical writers such as Lucan (or Aesop or Homer). The very setup made a confrontation inevitable and tragedy ensued, showing how the brutish nature of Man (the orcs) will always seek to destroy the nobility of our spirits (the king), resulting in chaos and instability and internal conflict (the ensuing civil war is seen as a symbol of inner, human conflict), that can only, possibly, be salvaged by true love (when the widowed queen marries her lover at the final day of the larp).

Another interpretation could be to see the scenario as a mainly absurd genre critique. The setting and props themselves seemed on a superficial level to invite us to believe that we were dealing with some sort of medieval scene with a few fantastic elements, but everywhere you saw the 'actors' and the material components trying to disrupt and break down this illusion. The 'actors' sometimes referred to current events like 9/11 and even spoke of themselves as actors (and some of them wore wristwatches) – and we haven't even begun to speak about the clear Von Trier/Dogville tribute in the use of common rope to symbolise walls! This is clearly a commentary to the multiple layers of fiction that we, as human beings, involve ourselves in at an everyday basis, living our lives as they weren't absurd! Wonderfully sharp observation!

It is hopefully clear from the above examples how story attribution can both be fun and challenging and how it can provide us with a way to compare and order different events in a larp into coherent, meaningful stories. Below you will find a suggestion as to how you in praxis can use this method to evaluate a larp.

Symposium - A Game of Story Attribution

The game consists of 3 simple rules and 7 easy steps.

3 Simple Rules

1 The larp is always referred to as 'The Piece' or some similar wording that in and of itself stresses that we are now seeing the larp as a single story-whole where everything is planned and intended. Accordingly the producers of the larp are referred to as 'The Author', 'The Larpwright' or 'The Director'.

2 As a speaker of the table you must under no circumstances refer to your own experience as a player in the larp. You must act as if you were present as audience only, not as a participant. If you want to refer to something that your role did, simply say something like "I think everybody is missing the shift that happened in the scene where Jimbo goads his fellow orcs into attacking the convoy". Remember, however, always to have the focus of creating a story-whole.

3 It is encouraged for the speakers of the table to take on different roles or styles of story attribution. In this way the game becomes a mini-larp in itself. You can be the socialist critic, the hip fashion-magazine reporter, the art nouveau literate, the layman, etc. Act and attribute accordingly.

7 Simple Steps

1 Place yourselves around a table or in a similar comfortable situation. It is recommended to be no more than 8 people and

no less than 4, at least if this is your first game.

2 Appoint a host of the symposium. The host stewards who gets to talk when and how much and makes sure that nobody gets lost in their interpretation.

3 The host gives a presentation of all the speakers present. He tells from where in The Piece they were situated as audience and, if you invoked rule #3 above, what critical inclination the speaker has.

4 The host now gives a swift presentation of the brute facts of The Piece. What happened when, how much and for how long. Be as specific and to the point as you can be, so you don't accidentally push the interpretations in a certain direction. Think of yourself as a serious news speaker or as a stiff, British clerk giving a debriefing.

5 On request from the host, the first speaker presents his interpretation of the meaning and story of The Piece. The host asks the table to comment on the interpretation, ask questions and discuss it. He makes sure that not too much times goes with this discussion by inviting the next speaker (the hardest critic of the current speaker for example) to give his interpretation.

6 When all speakers have presented their interpretation of The Piece the discussion is open for general criticism and evaluation such as The Authors ability to get his points across, the narrational economy, the quality of the set,

the actors, the morale of The Piece etc.

7 Let all hell loose, get drinks and talk about the scenario in any way you like: personal anecdotes, kudos to brilliant or funny performances or situations, slap backs and enjoy yourselves like you use to.

Have fun.[1]

1 The idea of story attribution in terms of regarding a larp as an intentional whole was conceived in a discussion with Malik Hyltoft, the co-headmaster of the RPG-inspired Østerskov Efterskole, during a lecture he gave on the possibility of creating a typology for describing larps in the fall of 2006. Without him, as with so many other things in Danish role-playing, this couldn't have been.

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Emma Wieslander

Rules of Engagement

I find it scary that the ten year-old text of Rules of Engagement is still in some respects so present-day. I would have hoped it wasn't. There has not been the plethora of other methods I then envisioned, and still in most larps there is a higher chance of a character dying than them making love.

However, things have changed too! Today I would write of participants across the world who have tried the methods I talk about. I would write about how the methods have broadened the possibility of play for players with either trans and/or non-heterosexual experience and orientation, and I would write about how they helped get the politics of sex onto the agenda, how we have created a whole new domain of stories.*

The method of Ars Amandi has spread into different variations adopted by different players and styles, and maybe that's enough for now. It serves all the purposes I had hoped it would, and maybe the real reason to read about it now is that it can still inspire us to begin with the people, not the frame, allowing players, not method, have focus — to let us simply love and be loved.

— Emma Wieslander

In most larps there is, strangely enough, a far higher risk of the character getting killed than making love. It seems that amorous interaction such as lovemaking, cuddling, hugging or just holding hands in a sensual or sexual manner, is quite taboo. Many seem to believe that it might be difficult to separate between the player's and the character's feelings and that the risk of someone trying to take advantage of the situation or getting hurt is too big. During most games this is unfortunately probably true.

Typically "rules" are all about portraying physical situations that one doesn't want the player to experience the same way as the character does and vice versa. A magician throwing a fireball or a blade hitting the character both require methods that make the events playable. It seems like the first genre of larp, just as the first genre of tabletop role-playing, was the typical hack 'n' slash in which the only methods needed would be those that simulate violence.

Since then role-playing themes have diversified and the methods have changed accordingly. Still, it is somewhat surprising how little the methodologies and thematic structures have changed. Perhaps there has been no demand for dramas without terror as primus motor and therefore there has been no need for methods unrelated to aggression – or maybe since there have been no effective methods, enacting other kinds of dramas have been too difficult.

Building the Stage

While drafting an agreement on what kind of interaction is to be expected, one in effect creates a safety net, or a stage, which will work as the frame of the game. By deciding beforehand what reactions are possible, it is easier for the players to experiment within their own limits and reach character emotions that they otherwise might feel too insecure to aim for. For example a common agreement is, regardless of rule-system, that no one will be stabbed by a real blade. This makes it possible for the opposing fighting units to clash and although the characters might experience fear of dying (a risk that they are apparently ready to take), the player won't have to evaluate it quite as seriously. This keeps the fighting within the diegesis.

Obviously, these agreements should be general, applying to all such interaction since each player isn't capable of communicating with all others beforehand on a one-toone basis. Also, remembering who is comfortable with what can be difficult. It is simply more straightforward to state what methods are to be used and then let the players decide if they want to take part in that when they sign up for the game.

When it comes to other strong emotions than aggression there haven't been such general agreements traditionally. Some might even ban amorous interaction altogether. The general strategy, however, seems to be open to the idea that if players want to act on strong emotions together they should work something out between them beforehand. This would, in comparison with building a stage together, be like pointing players to a pile of boards and nails.

This laissez-faire strategy is rather counterproductive from a safety point of view as it leaves much room for group pressure and miscommunication. Neither does it cover situations that arise during the game, i.e. situations that have not been prepared for. It also puts a big part of the interaction outside the diegesis, as it requires for the players to communicate borders and limits as the situation proceeds. That makes it virtually impossible for them to relax and for the character to fully experience the moment.

The Discussion

Two of the strongest peaks of the human scale of emotions are aggression and lust. Whereas most people agree that the unleashed display of aggression would be a bad thing, even a discussion about the deployment of lust seems to be avoided. In its

limited existence the discussion on acting out love on larps has, on most occasions, been banal. A typical example of the discussion is available as late as in December 2003 at the G-punkt forum[1] (author's summary):

> In the thread *Sex och lajv* the issue of sex in larps was approached. The question was put forward as "Is it possible?" Not only was the poster thinking about doing a larp on prostitution and therefore might be perceived as quite ignorant in asking about sex, but the discussion also soon amounted to a typical debate on contraceptives and STDs. The discussion showed quite clearly that sex is understood as heterosexual, vaginal (pregnancy) and penetrative (STDs), limiting the possibilities of methods. It also shows that no general understanding has been reached (as it has been when it comes to violence).
>
> The main schism lay in "in token" versus "in true". Tokenism was seen as using rules and thereby the debaters missed that both tokenism and "true" are possible methods (rules). Several of the posts also suggested that sex that isn't intercourse is either not sex or a simulation of sex. The only alternative to a token rules solution that was initially presented was clearly defining personal limits and responsibility.

The *positive power drama* strategy was formed partly as a counterpoint to this kind of reasoning (read more about that strategy in the other article by the author in this book) and has since then been a tool to bring the discussion to a more sensible level. The point being to be able to discuss the enacting of amorous (i.e. loving, sensual or sexual) situations in a way that allows participants to distinguish between player and character and to remove the uneasiness that seem to accompany the theme in many other discussions.

Methods at Hand

Although few larps have had any general agreement on deployment of methods for amorous situations, there have been methods available for those who wanted to play such scenes. Historically there seem to have been a couple of main "schools":

- WYSIWYG: What you see is what you get. The participant acts out everything that the character does. There is no distinction between the player's and the character's actions, although there might be differences in how the player and the character interpret these actions and the reactions they provoke. Whether this means that it is acceptable for the participant to have intercourse as a character or the belief that a participant can in fact have intercourse completely in character are the main themes of discussion in this school. Deciding how far one wants to go is up to the individual.
- Massage: One participant gives a back massage to another participant who then groans to give players nearby something to react to. This line of thinking implies that sexual interaction can be normalised as something not mutual.
- Conversation: Participants talk through what happens – a fusion of larp and storytelling.
- Clothes On: The way of simulating intercourse where parties grind against each other with their clothes on. Quite often the mood is ironic or at least distanced rather than amorous. This seems to have been a quite common way of simulating a "harmless" version of rape in orc games in the past.

Still, the method that seems to have been most common (at least in Sweden), is where

1 *G-punkt* (eng. G-spot [sic]) hosts the Galadrim web forum at www.larp.com/galadrim/debatt/

players that know in advance that their characters might have amorous encounters during the game talk through what areas of their respective bodies they are willing to let the other player touch – and then stick with that within the WYSIWYG method. Also, in games where safe words (such as *cut* and *brems*[1]) are used, these can be employed as possible safety net.

Hand-to-Hand Love Making

The most recent lovemaking method was created within the project *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea). It is both a very limiting and enabling method. The lovers restrict themselves to touching only each other's hands, arms, shoulders and necks as part of the lovemaking. Above armpit and below earlobes is permitted. To make this exciting they use eye contact, a lot of focus and vary the touch in sensual, rough or playful manners. Variations can be made where different usage might translate into different types of amorous interaction, but this has to be agreed on within the specific game.

Since the hands are very sensitive, most of the emotions that can be present in an amorous situation can be conveyed in this fashion. Only the hands, arms and neck are to be used in touching the other person. If mouth, tongue or teeth are employed it could easily get too intimate for the player/character distinction to be made. Sound, breathing and other body language communication is however possible means of amplifying the experience.

Using the Method

The *Ars Amandi method*[2] has been used as the general agreement at two larps so far,

Mellan himmel och hav and *Ringblomman* (The Marigold). It was also tested in an unfinished form at *Futuredrome*. The two larps that have used it were very different in themes and in their deployment of the method as well. Mellan himmel och hav was a science fiction game set in an alternative world and had seventy players. Ringblomman was a social game exploring communal living in 1978 with approximately thirty players.

There are basically two ways to use a method. Either it's a diegetical method (this is how the characters does it, e.g. Mellan himmel och hav) or it is a player method (this is what the player does to simulate something that the character experiences, e.g. Ringblomman). In the diegesis of Mellan himmel och hav intercourse was considered to be something very unpleasant that one only subjected oneself to in order to produce children. It was basically seen as the uncomfortable necessity; no sane person would ever think that having intercourse was something they did for pleasure. Instead, people made love using the Ars Amandi method and the main erogenous zones where simply diegetically placed there (hands, arms, neck).

This made it possible not only for the lovemaking to be gender-blind, but also for a diegetic distinction between those the characters could and would produce offspring with and those they only felt loving lust for. The hands, although highly eroticised, were of course also used for everyday things but the diegetic way to make love made a random touch of another's hand much more tantalising.

1 Cut and brems are Norwegian expressions for cut and brake. Using brems means that the scene is progressing toward uneasy ground and the player told to brems should steer the situation in a different direction. Cut stops the game; participants leave the game area and talk through what just happened in the game.

2 Ars Amandi means the art of lovemaking and is the name of the organizers' collective that produced both *Ringblomman* and *Mellan himmel och hav*.

Ringblomman, being a historical game, had no such elements in its diegetic frame. The characters that made love during Ringblomman had sex the way most humans do, some by caressing and some by penetrative intercourse. The players, however, only touched the areas of the Ars Amandi method. This requires a tad more of the players' imagination and some might choose to translate touches into their different counterparts. Whether this is done by verbal communication, in the respective players imagination or by other means is left open to the players in that specific situation. The point of using the method here is to allow for the parties to explore and devote themselves to the situation without player interaction suddenly substituting character interaction.

The real challenge of using the method as a symbol for diegetic action is the shift between WYSIWYG interaction and method interaction. This worked very well in the game and also other sensual interaction like kissing could be worked in with touching cheek to cheek. During Ringblomman the method was used to enact everything from innocent teen love to dramatic games of dominance. This rather extensive testing of the method shows that it is very flexible since it works equally well in amorous situations that are sensual and esthetical as well as in other types of interaction.

Amorous and Not

The term *amorous* is an all-encompassing term for describing loving un-platonic interaction. It encompasses everything from suggestive eye contact to full blown sexual activity. In order for interaction to be amorous it has to be loving. That means that not all sexual, or even sensual, interaction can be seen as amorous. Both Ringblomman and Mellan himmel och hav were games produced within the positive power drama and the method was used exclusively to enact mutual interaction, even when used in a rougher fashion. It is however possible to use the method in more negatively coloured events and even in situations where the characters aren't necessarily consenting.

The method, being created for use within the positive power drama, is mainly intended to enable the making of amorous situations. It is however flexible enough to be used in other sexual or close to sexual interaction. It might also be even more important for the negative drama to use methods that separate the players' and characters' experiences. In the case of molestation or sexual abuse the areas of the method work just as well as the genital and breast areas. When a prostitute performs it is easy to interact without the spark and eye contact and to just stretch the arms forward inanimately. Using the method would in all likeliness enhance the experience of degradation and stop such interaction from being romanticized or done mindlessly.

Possibly the method could be used even in non-drama larps such as mainstream fantasy, generic cyberpunk games or costumes larps. A possible variation of the method might be to limit it to encompass only the arms (not hands and neck) in order to prevent it from being too powerful. The notion might sound strange to someone who hasn't tried the method, but it really should be considered in games where maximum intensity isn't a top priority.

Conclusions

A powerful method to enact amorous situation was greatly needed. Although the Ars Amandi method is a neat tool, it isn't everything one might wish for. There is definitely room for other methods that serve similar purposes just as there are several different systems for fighting. It seems to have worked rather well during the events it's been used in so far. What is especially striking is its flexibility. The downside of the method is however that it requires both concentration and, in the player method version, some imagination of the players using it.

One possible scenario is to expand the method into a larger system of methods (like the latex system is not one method but several disciplines of how to make weapons

and use them). The cheek-to-cheek kissing is one such addition. Possible general area or touch "translations" might become available, usable in games where the difference between types of sexual interaction is important. Crossover versions usable in tabletop role-playing might evolve as well as lighter versions for non-drama larps. Another scenario is of course that the making of one such system inspires others to create other systems that are better suited for other types of interaction or that would be attractive to other types of gaming than the ones that the method has been used in so far.

The bottom-line of working with the Ars Amandi method is that it has proved very useful, both in diegetical and in player versions. The magic of making love without the involvement of any of the areas that are generally perceived as the parts involved in lovemaking is impossible to convey through text. What can be described are merely the why and the clinical how. The emotional impact is, like reactions to other amorous interaction, so individual that it is impossible to generalize. That is probably where the real virtue of the method lies; it truly begins in the people, not the frame, making them, rather than the method, the focus and simply letting them love and be loved.

Games

Futuredrome (2002) by Henrik Wallgren, Staffan Sörensson et al., Sweden

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Sweden

Ringblomman (2004) by Karin Tidbeck et al., Sweden

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Tobias Wrigstad

The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform

In 2006, I started writing a book on jeepform, a specific style of role-playing that this article introduces. For various reasons, the book never made it far, but in 2008, I distilled some chunks of my written material into this article. Around then, jeepform was finally parting ways with a lot of its freeform roots, and branching into "more interesting" work like Doubt, Gang Rape, and Fat Man Down. In a sense, this article may very well have been a necessary part of my own personal process to leave the old jeeping behind, in the rear view mirror.

What is in this article is as true today as it was back then, and judging by how people still abuse the role-playing medium, it is every bit as relevant. It is also one of the most translated pieces of jeep out there, and is likely good reference material for tracing jeeping developments elsewhere in the world.

I would expect that most of its contents have now saturated the Knutpunkt community for many years. So: if you are like me, you can read it for its etymological value. If not, I suggest you read it — and jeep!

— Tobias Wrigstad

Jeepform is a style of freeform role-playing that stresses the importance of the meta-play, transparency and tailoring the techniques to emphasise the story. It has been likened to improvisational theatre, psychodrama and performance art, and been called "what theatre might become" as well as "freeform role-playing done right." This article is a personal introduction to jeepform, its background and how it differs from freeform, and some jeepform ideas and techniques interleaved within the rest of the text with a tiny bit of analysis sprinkled on top. In a sense, this is a partial ingredients-slip from the jeepform kool-aid bottle.[1]

Table-top and larp achieve story through simulation – jeepform doesn't.

The way I see it, both larp and tabletop role-play approach storytelling from a more or less simulationistic approach. Larp tries to create a spitting image of the shared fantasy with real gaming locations, real props, walking and talking like your character, and so forth – a simulation of the game world where the agents are the larpers immersing into their characters. Tabletop, on the other hand, uses rules, dice and probability to simulate the workings of the fictional world and to unify the shared fantasy into a consistent whole. In both larp and tabletop, by playing by the rules and immersing one hopes to create a good story. However, these stories are like the "stories" of actual life: they have less than optimal dramatic curves, non-perfect timing, and they tell tales that are no good until you are given the missing piece of the puzzle post-game. In contrast, jeepform role-play is not about simulating, but about collaborative creation of tight, dramatic and story-focused roleplay.

This article is about jeepform role-playing, about some of its core values, how to play, run and write jeepform games. Most jeepform ideas are completely compatible with (or stolen from) any tabletop or larp game you might be running, or might just save you from the hassles of organising a larp to be able to tell that story of yours.

Capsule Guide to the Roots of Jeepform

Jeepform role-play revolves around the story and the experience of playing. Jeepform sprung from the Swedish freeform tradition (which can be roughly described as incorporating larp-like elements into tabletop and approaching storytelling much like writing a script for a play or a movie). For the jeepers and creepers of *Vi åker jeep*[2], freeform role-play was a reaction against elements in tabletop, including the following:

Rules

Dice

Tables

Dragons

New York

We view *rules* (in the *Dungeons & Dragons* sense of the word, for simulating a world or determining the outcome of an action) as bad because they constrain the game too much and focus on the wrong thing: simulation rather than story (admittedly, some Forge-style games are moving in the right direction with respect to rules). In many games and sessions, the game master must bend the rules or ignore them to avoid destroying the dramatic structure of the sto-

1 This article is based on presentation material developed together with Olle Jonsson, Thorbiörn Fritzon, Martin Brodén, Per Wetterstrand and Anders Nygren. A list of jeep people can be found at jeepen.org/people.

2 Eng. We go by Jeep, a distributed group of role-players accumulated over the years who publish and preach under the jeep moniker.

ry. In other games (or stories), rules are just completely unnecessary.[1]

Dice are bad because they behave randomly. Granted, sometimes this is necessary, for example if it is *impossible* to decide between two equally interesting outcomes of an action, or if we just get stuck. But the way dice are used in traditional tabletop, they are just not beneficial to the story.

When it comes to *tables*, both kinds are bad. Tables in rule books are bad because going in to rule books to look things up breaks the flow of the game and draws attention away from the story and playing the characters. Furthermore, the canonical living room gaming table is bad as it distances the players from each other and encourages a sit-down style of play instead of using your entire body for acting things out. Sitting down generally makes a game less energetic, forces breaks in the game to talk about what the characters do rather than doing it. Not using your entire body for playing your character is like calling your boyfriend on the phone rather than meeting him – just not as good.

By *dragons*, I do not mean dragons specifically, but the erroneous notion of bigger monsters being cooler than smaller ones – or no monsters at all.[2] To jeeps, facing your suicidal, bullied-as-hell teenage daughter makes for a much more powerful scene than facing a boatload of orcs. Stories do not require monsters, at least not the kinds of monsters that we generally came across in most tabletop games in the days of old.

Last, by *New York*, I again do not mean New York specifically. For some reason, we have seen that most scenarios and campaigns take place in made-up worlds and cities that are labelled as "officially cool" from being featured in movies and TV shows. Why are there so few vampires in backwater towns? Why do so many players refuse to play games about their home towns?

Freeform

On the Swedish con scene, the freeform movement came to the rescue in the early to mid 1990's. It was partly inspired by things like dramatic writing and script writing, movies and larp, the latter (notably not using complex character sheets or resolution mechanics) being on the up and up.[3]

Many freeform stories were less fantastic in terms of monster encounters, people started using their bodies to act things out, and less fantastic diegetic locations started cropping up. There were fewer quests, no hitpoints, levels or experience points, and the outcomes of actions – and in most cases, the development of the game – was governed by the rules of collaborative storytelling: all things that improve the story

1 As a side-note: Jeepform uses the word rules a bit differently. Some recent examples of Jeep type rules can be found in Gang Rape (2008): "Having a game master is not allowed – every player must be either the victim or one of the rapists" or "Not all rapists can be strangers" or in Doubt (2007): "Time is linear" or "Doubt is a heterosexual game". Another use of rule can be found in Jordsmak (2008) where every scene must last for exactly one song of a particular album.

2 Many Nordic playing styles have moved away from this today, even though some feel the need to hide behind Space Bedouins or global conspiracies to get the juices flowing.

3 At Swedish role-playing conventions, people were competing in role-playing, originally by solving quests, later by performing their characters. The most important positive side-effect of this was that conventions featured "official games" run in parallel by many game masters. Different authors were competing in creating the best games, for some definition of that, which naturally spurred people's willingness to experiment.

are Good Things™. Freeform games experimented with how games were played, and questioned many of the standard practices of traditional tabletop. Freeform got rid of conventions such as each player having a character of her own and games being about a group of humanoids following a story arc. In freeform, you had a patchwork story with five different scenes with four new characters in each that would never meet.

My personal retrospective definition of freeform is this:

> *freedom to adapt the form to the story, for every story*

This should be compared to starting out with the rules of, say *Vampire: Masquerade* (1991), its world, mythos and standard way of playing. Naturally, though one can play awesome games with

Vampire or any other tabletop game, here we are talking about *the telling of a specific story* and then finding or constructing the game world and necessary game mechanics to do it, rather than the other way around.

Enter Jeepform

Jeepform builds on the Swedish freeform legacy. The way I see it, freeform stopped being about adapting form to the story at hand pretty early on. The will to experiment died out, and freeform became a label for a fairly fixed form where a group of characters experienced an "adventure" in mostly linear time relying heavily on role-playing rather than action sequences, as no-one had yet come up with a satisfactory solution for playing action or resolving action elements. Freeform games and tabletop games started to converge again, making freeform to some extent a for-free role-playing book, distributed and kept alive in oral tradition, making it less approachable by the man on the street.

In hindsight, jeepform can be viewed as a reaction against a few trends in freeform, including but not limited to the following:

Fixed form

Lack of premise or subject

Heroes and villains

With *fixed form*, we mean that the freeform toolbox stopped growing while it was still small, and that the parts of it that were actually used were only a subset. Jeepform seeks to enlarge the toolbox and emphasises that every game design starts with a blank page and that things like *character ownership* (only Bob plays Dracula), *linear time* and similar classic freeform defaults are optional. Their use must be a conscious choice and the game designer must be aware of their effects on the game.

Jeepform games try to have a *premise* or a *subject*, meaning they are about something. They are not supposed to just be the coolest story you could come up with at the time of writing (although they sometimes are). Premises and subjects can be as pretentious or non-pretentious as one likes. Classic examples of premises are "love conquers all" and "greed leads to misery", but they can be much more colourful and interesting. A subject for a game can be memory, misremembering and disremembering. Having a subject or a premise helps you focus the game on what is relevant and also helps players and game masters determine what is right for the story at hand, how to approach it etc.

Jeepform games recognise that *heroes and villains* are not necessary ingredients for a good story. The characters do not even need to be the lead characters. It is not necessary for the characters to save the world for a game to be involving, interesting or stimulating. Saving a relationship can be equally rewarding, and is easier to relate to and immerse in. What do the guys in the sausage stand talk about all day? What is it like to fail graduation? What happens after

I casually convert to Judaism in order to marry Disa?

All in all, jeepform is a kind of freeform that is *form-oriented, subtle and directed* – in both senses of the word. It enlarges and enriches the freeform toolbox and encourages use of a wider range of techniques and the abolishing of a stable notion of what it is.

Do it Like the Larpers – Except Don't

Jeepform is generally played in a lightweight larp style without actual props or prepared game locations. There are several good reasons for that, as a larp style of playing makes the game more agile – several scenes can be played out simultaneously, the entire body can be used to play the characters, and less time is needed to convey information such as movement, which can be simulated by using the physical space. A well prepared gaming location forces the story to fit to the room, while a generic venue can turn into anything that is required by the story.[1]

Constructing a car out of four chairs is neither very cool nor does much for immersion – but it gains agility. A player can exit the car by opening an imaginary door and step out. Again, this allows things to happen in the game, and the characters move about without forcing the role-playing to pause in favour of broadcasting meta-comments[2] such as "I step out of the car" or "My character steps out of the car".

Most Nordic larpers would (rightfully) tell you that avoiding out-of-character communication facilitates immersion, at least to a certain extent. Avoiding out-of-character communication makes it easier to connect to the thoughts and feelings of your character, the essence of role-playing besides storytelling. Voice-overs from a narrator rather than descriptions from a game master give a more dramatic flair and opens up for a non-impartial storyteller.

The Importance of Telegraphing

One of the most important and constant activities of a jeepform game is *telegraphing* – the broadcasting of information that helps keep the shared imagination in sync, preferably in an unobtrusive way. In tabletop, you generally rely on meta-communication for this, speaking out of character about the imagined physical reality. In larp, most things represent themselves voiding the need for much of the telegraphing (but sometimes creating the need for more – what can I do with that prop of yours?). In most jeepform games, we try to do all telegraphing in character. This is agile – we can use gestures and postures and a lot of such things can go on simultaneously without pausing the game. Below are a few examples of telegraphing, both from a game master's and a player's points of view.

Postures and Space

Our example characters climb out of the car constructed by chairs and enter a bomb shelter. They first exit the car and move a couple of meters to symbolise the movement (and to have enough clear space away from the car so it is clear that Bob is still by the car and not where the others are). The game master takes the lead as they climb down the ladder. She walks among the players as if she too was entering the shelter. She touches the wall saying "*I wonder what that smell is*". She is crouching as she walks telling all the players that the roof is very low in the shelter. She shakes from the cold and perhaps even stutters a little. All her input is in the form of thoughts and feelings attached to some unnamed character allowing the players to decide what does and does not fit with their character.

1 It should be noted that Swedish freeform was developed playing in 30-person class rooms schools, something which has definitely had impact on the style of play.

2 Players talking about the game.

Alternatively, she might be very specific about what character she is giving information as. This can be useful if we know that Richard, whose thoughts and feeling the game master is playing, is a claustrophobic. The other players will realise that their view of the current location differs from Richard's, and perhaps not crouch and not feel the cold or the smell. If the game master needs them to feel the smell too, she could just briefly make eye contact with another player saying "*Yeah, I feel it too,*" thereby solving the problem. Another way is spitting out tiny bits of information as short descriptive bursts (e.g. "*gray stone*", "*damp*", "*sounds of water dripping*") without interrupting the characters. Different game masters have different styles, which is a good thing.

By crouching, the game master will make the players crouch. This allows a player to run for the exit and at some point stand up straight to show that he has exited the shelter: Other players see this and can thus avoid talking to him or mistaking him for still being in the shelter. Telegraphing with your body is powerful and agile and helps immersion. At least when you've learned to interalise it.

Symbolic Props

Jeepform discourages the use of actual props as there is generally no way of knowing what kinds of props a game might need. Instead, we use symbolic props: Any object can represent another. An object that is commonly found around game locations is the pen, so let me give you some examples on how a pen is telegraphed to represent something else. Manny gives a bouquet of flowers to Phyllis. Manny's player hands the pen over saying "*I wanted to give you red roses, but they only had yellow*". All players now know that the pen represents a bouquet of flowers: When Phyllis breaks the pen in two and throws it on the ground, the action cannot be misunderstood.

Later in the game, half of the same pen is used as a knife. Still groggy after the seizure and car crash, Richard threatens to kill Manny unless he tells him the truth about what happened: Why he passed out in a car only to wake up in a cabin that he has never seen before. He pulls the pen out of his pocket and holds it to Manny's throat. When Manny starts talking, Richard relaxes and puts the pen down on the table. Fred sneaks up behind him and grabs it, shifting the power balance.

Telegraphing in Time

In the jeepform game *The Upgrade!* (2005), the game space is divided into three areas: past, present and possible future. Everything that takes place in the present is supposedly shown on a TV screen. Players whose characters are off-screen watch the scene in the present area and may at any time start a scene in the past area or possible future area that gives context to or changes the meaning of the scene going on in the present.

The way the game is set up, the mere act of standing up and walking onto the stage is telegraphing "*I'm starting a scene which will give perspective to the scene on the TV screen*". In such a scene, the player on stage can assume any character at any point in time. To avoid pausing the game too much, telegraphing can be used here too. For example, an idle player walks onto the stage, causing the TV screen to pause. The player turns to the rest of the idle players saying "*Maude, dear, will you come into the kitchen*?" Now, all the players know the scene is set in the kitchen, that the player who will walk onto the scene will be Maude, and that the player on the stage is Danny, Maude's husband who was previously introduced. To cast Danny as Danny, Maude may answer, "*Yes, Danny darling!*" if she wants to.

Telegraphing creates an opportunity for vagueness, which is almost always a bonus. If the tentative Maude wants to, she might walk in saying "*Don't do that again. I hate it when you call me by her name.*" Likewise, Danny could do the same thing,

saying "*Christine, you shouldn't have come back here again. I'm expecting Maude home any second! You must understand it is over*," probably surprising the player supposedly playing Maude, and everyone else.

Details Considered Harmful

Naturally, at times it is not possible or necessary to use only in-character telegraphing. The key is to keep the telegraphing short and unobtrusive to avoid disturbing the game.[1] A good rule of thumb is to think of telegraphing as steering a vehicle by very light nudges, soft enough not to cause any real loss of speed.

Telegraphing to introduce characters or places should generally be kept short. For example, long descriptions of places can usually be cut. Focus on the important bits, and keep the rest vague. Vagueness is good as it allows the players to fill in the missing details in their head or in the shared fantasy, both of which are good. Most things in role-playing games will not benefit from a dictator deciding every little detail. When you go collaborative, you must start thinking not only about what information you include, but also what you exclude to give space to other players to contribute. This is a new dimension to many players, and getting used to think about it generally requires some practice.

Transparency

Transparency denotes the absence of secrets. The jeep believes that secrets are bad for most roleplaying games, including but not limited to jeepform ones.

Since jeepform players are collaborating to create the best possible story, they should be equipped accordingly. This means that secrets between characters should not be secrets between players.

If everyone knows that Manny is falling in love with Phyllis, the players can cooperate on creating situations toying with this fact. Fred can make sure to give them space, or the opposite, depending on where the game is going, or Phyllis might start getting friendly with Fred to make Manny jealous. Fred might even strike up a conversation with Manny about how raunchy Phyllis is, and how he'd like to tie her up and have sex with her. The point is that if Manny's player is the only one who knows about Manny's growing affection for Phyllis, the chances of this making it into the game in a good way are slimmer. The same thing goes if Manny is the spy who has infiltrated Fred and Phyllis' terrorist cell. Knowing that Manny is a spy will help the other players to make the game better and more interesting.

Sometimes, keeping a secret makes for a nice surprise in a good way at some point in the game. Jeepform does not ban secrets between players, but stresses that they are rarely needed. Start out with the game being completely transparent, and only hide things if you think it will be an improvement.

Full Transparency

In the spirit of transparency, you may ask whether it might be better to show the scenario to the players beforehand. Some games definitely benefit from the players not knowing what is going to happen beforehand and some do not. Jeepform is about collaborative storytelling and not about the game master surprising the players with an unforeseen story twist that changes everything in the end. Just as with the players' secrets, rather than secluding things by default, do it the other way around. Whatever you do, do it consciously, understand the effects, and do it for a good reason.

But what is the point of playing if you know the story in advance? One part of the answer is that it is about the same as watching a movie where you know the hero is going to make it, but it is still exciting to

1 See Night of Nights (2008) for a counter-example, though.

see how she will pull it off and what the consequences will be. Players behave randomly enough for almost any story to take unexpected turns, and the game can also be about surprising each other by taking it to the next level. Bottom line: just because you know the end does not mean you will not be surprised by how it is achieved.

The jeepform game *Baby Steps* (2006) is a good example of a game with in-game secrets that is vastly improved by transparency. It is a game played as a therapy session: Three people are trying to come to terms with different kinds of guilt surrounding the death of a child. This game is about how slow the session progresses, how easy and appealing it can be to roll around in the mud of your own misery, and how hard it can be to forgive or let yourself be forgiven. The characters all have the exact same information of the night when the mother accidentally killed her child with the car, even though they are free to interpret it however they want. They know each other's secrets and desires, which helps them push each other's buttons during the game. The game is also about looking back, which is played as short scenes interleaved with the session. These scenes are entirely player-driven and thus the players need to have all information about the events that took place.

The players constantly negotiate the fates of their characters in the meta-play: will they take a step towards closure, no step at all, or a step in the wrong direction? In this case, the game is about playing it well and making the session powerful and moving. As there is no winning or losing, there is no need to keep the players in the dark. The game master playing the psychologist is instructed not to give a straight answer to any question or directly help the characters reach closure, but to only mediate. This is pretty much the only fact of the game that is not told the players.

Talking about the game in advance to agree on a suitable tone for it is a good thing, even if this discloses the fact that the characters will die in the end. Collaboration requires that the players have some kind of converging focus and are going in the same or compatible directions. Too many secrets and chance elements are bad in this respect, unless handled very well and with care.

Power to the Players

In jeepform games, the players generally enjoy a high degree of freedom with respect to their characters – and sometimes to the story. A player may add detail to her character at any point as long as it does not make the character inconsistent. Anything may be added, including story-relevant additions to the character's past, sexual preferences, skills, diseases and possessions. Furthermore, the players may add detail to the surroundings, and where appropriate, call for additional scenes. The players can also decide between success and failure and their consequences. These things are generally handled without resorting to out-of-character communication.

The reasons for this additional freedom are threefold: several heads are better than one at providing rich details; it will improve the story if the characters can be adapted to it; and because it makes the game more agile. Having to turn back to Rivendell because you didn't bring enough rope gets old pretty soon.

Giving this power to the players makes proper telegraphing even more important as the players might otherwise, by mistake, abuse their power and damage the game. The game master must ensure that the players are aware of how their power might be used at all times. This is done through telegraphing and a combination of restrictions communicated at the start of play. For example, before the game, the game master might instruct the players to not change details about their characters' backgrounds, as further details will be revealed during the game.

Power Over the Story

In addition to having power to change things about their own characters on the fly, jeepform relies on the players to make decisions about the outcome of action situations with respect to where the story is going. In many cases, the outcome of an action is not as important for the story as its impact on the characters it involves. In these situations, the players will often decide what happens, negotiating amongst themselves and with the game master in the meta-play while continuing to play their characters.

For example, Phyllis, Manny and Fred are playing a drinking game (in-game), basically a glorified truth-or-dare. A dice is rolled and a pawn is moved an equal number of steps to a new square. Some squares require the player to answer a question, others simply require her to take a shot of vodka. The players play without dice and place their pawns on the squares that allow the correct type of truth questions and dares. Phyllis' player decides that Phyllis has bad luck and ends up drinking loads of vodka in the beginning, making the character drunk. The player reasons that this will make it more believable to be forthcoming with the questions, and lowers her guard towards Manny. She has a feeling that the game is headed in a direction where Manny and Phyllis will end up sharing a bed.

Later on, Phyllis and Manny are being chased by Richard and Fred. The game master realises that the important thing about this chase is how it cements the relationship of Phyllis and Manny, as they are faced with a common enemy. She also realises this will give ample opportunity for Richard to disclose why he is acting the way he is, while talking to Fred in the car. In this case, the players are facing each other, Phyllis and Manny on one side and Richard and Fred on the other. Seeing each others' faces will help the players to negotiate on what should happen. Phyllis and Manny stress over being chased and quickly start yelling at each other, Manny's player says "hold onto something, here they come", before making a *Star Trek*-inspired gesture to indicate that the car was hit. As Fred yells "Look out for that sausage stand!", everyone knows that Richard and Fred are hitting a sausage stand. Richard says: "the wheel is stuck," and Fred slams his fist into the car door in frustration. "We've lost them. Damn it!" The game master cuts the scene and fast forwards: "Later that evening, in the motel room, with the car safely parked in the forest," pointing at Phyllis and Manny.

In the above example, the chasing players decided that it would be nice if they did not catch Manny and Phyllis, and decided to collide with a sausage stand and get stuck. When Richard decided that the wheel was stuck, he could glance at the game master, giving her the opportunity to shake her head ever so slightly if she had another idea about what should happen. If she did, Richard could have backed off the situation by saying "I'll reverse out of it. Just sit tight!", and the chase would have gone on. Richard could also glance at Phyllis and Manny to see their opinion on the suggested outcome.

Truth is in High Flux

In games where players get to decide the outcome of actions, rewrite the past of their characters and pull whatever out of their backpacks to support the story, the truth is in a high state of flux. Sometimes there is no truth – only story.

Not having too fixed a notion of truth gives a lot of freedom and allows the story to go anywhere. In *The Upgrade!*, a player may temporarily take on another player's character for a short scene that serves as a comment to the ongoing game. The player has the same power over the borrowed character as her regular character.

For example, if Julia and Tom are falling in love on a couch in Tom's apartment, another player might suddenly leap up and start a scene in which Tom has another woman in his apartment the night before where he is saying similar things to her. This brings

new information into the game and makes the situation more interesting. Is Tom, now obviously a ladies' man, playing Julia, or is he falling for her for real? Quite possibly the scene just improved the game by bringing more possibilities to Tom's player.

Similarly, playing a story backwards will cause constant reinterpretations of the previous scenes. "Why did I do that? Aha!"

Truth being in high flux affects things like character creation. If where the character grew up is not relevant to the story, it is not important, and thus it should not be included. In some games, the details you leave out are every bit as important as the details you include. The character description should still be enough to go on, but let the players themselves fill in the blanks while the game is running. If it seems like a good idea to establish two characters as sisters half-way into the game, go ahead! The usual tendency to over-specify background information is often bad for the play.

It is important to introduce new facts in such a way that other players can "back out" if it doesn't fit their wants (rather than relying on rules like "embrace everything"). Throwing yourself at someone yelling "*Sis!*" might not be a good idea as it does not leave the player room to back out.

Abuse of Power, and the Problem of Power Shifting

Generally, players never abuse their game master powers[1]. They realise that when the man with a knife threatens them in the alley, they are threatened for a reason and thus, inventing a gun that was never mentioned before is most likely a bad choice.

The biggest problem with giving power to the players is coaching them to make use of it.

Some players are uncomfortable with making decisions about things traditionally controlled by a game master or are afraid of making the "wrong" decisions. Be sure to use telegraphing in a way that makes the players secure about such decisions, and be sure to always discuss player power with your players until you are sure they have grasped the concept and are comfortable enough with it to actually use it. As was visible from the car chase example, they have every possibility of coordinating with the game master to avoid messing up the big picture.

The Levels of a Game

While jeepform neither follows, encourages, or presents a specific model of role-playing, it realises that a game takes place on at least three levels simultaneously: *the actual game level*, *the meta play level* and *the inner play level*. Most likely there are other names for these and elaborations on the distinction, but this is outside the scope of this text.

The actual game is everything that goes on in the shared fantasy – the interaction between the characters, etc. This is what is generally meant by "the game". The meta play is the social interplay between the players who are playing the characters, and the inner play is what goes on inside the minds of the *characters*.

Meta Play

Just as the player's character will experience something during a game, so will the player. Some will claim that separating the player from the character is impossible. Quite a few actors seem to differ. In this text, it won't really matter.

If the premise of a game is to discuss infidelity, then it seems likely that the game can be played as well in the meta play as in the actual play. Or rather, the actual play is just a way of affecting the players (that exist in the meta-level by Jeep terms) through the characters (that are in the actual play).

1 Likely, in part because jeepform games isn't about winning or loosing, or XPs.

Affecting the characters is perfectly possible through the players. Showing your players horror movies before playing a Cthulhu scenario will likely make their characters behave differently. Why not leave the window open to make the room a bit colder for the arctic scenario?

A very classic example of meta play techniques can be found in traditional tabletop sessions. There, the game master would at times roll a dice, hide the result and consult a table to determine if the players had alarmed the guards or spotted a hidden item. This would tell the players that something was happening and increase the tension. Many game masters realised this and started performing the stunt when no guards or hidden artifacts were present in order to indirectly affect the game: keep the players (and their characters) on their toes.[1]

Jeepform acknowledges things going on outside the game and capitalises on that to improve the game. If there is an important hockey game the same evening, can the players' desire to learn its outcome be exploited in any way? If two players are an item, can that be used to achieve an effect? If most of your players have played your previous games, can this be used?

No Sign of Alex (2001) is about misconceptions and memories. "*Is this really a memory or did I just dream it up when I was young?*" To this end, the players' character texts are filled with inconsistencies, things that the characters should probably not know, et cetera. The goal is to create an uncertainty among the players about what is really true and what information they can use. Does this text really depict what was going through my cousin's mind, or is this my interpretation? Albeit subtle, hopefully this inflicts the game and the reading of the character text and more importantly makes the players feel as their characters should – a bit confused and not certain of what is true. In that game the game master should constantly lie to sustain the uncertainty.

Inner Play

The inner play is what goes on inside the mind of the characters. Exposing the inner play brings more information about the characters to the table, which is great in the spirit of transparency. It also makes it more interesting to have introvert characters and play – for example – conflicts that never give rise to some actual action.

From my experience, use of monologues (where a character says what is on his mind while other pause) is widespread in at least Swedish and Danish freeform. If Tom, secretly, flirts with a barmaid while Julia, his girlfriend, is there, Julia's monologue can make the scene much more interesting.

In *Salaligan* (2000), monologues were used to skip the violent part of the game where the characters assault a police station with the purpose of killing as many police officers as possible. Rather than playing the scene, or playing a scene where the characters discuss the events, the players give one short monologue each about how they felt, also detailing what happened. In this monologue, one character also turns the whole scenario around by making the players, not the characters, understand what is going to happen down the road – how the game is likely to end. This particular example combines fate play with monologues, more or less inserting a fate through the character monologue. Players understand the new direction the game is taking, and start moving characters in the right direction.

Yet another unobtrusive technique for exposing the inner play is called *insides/outsides* (Højgård, 1971). When playing with insides and outsides, the player gives

1 Other classic, great techniques for affecting the meta play include mood lighting and music. These are well-known and there is nothing we can say here that would bring anything new to the world.

running comments discussing what goes on inside the mind of a character (insides) regarding what happens in the actual play (outsides). In *Doubt* (2007), two players used this technique brilliantly in a flirt. Peter was flirting with his wife's assistant Maude at a fashion show, and promised to buy Maude one of the dresses shown on the runway if she would let him see her in it. He would pick dresses, and if he managed to pick one that had not yet been sold, the deal was on. Peter had "talked to the audience" about Maude to show that he was sizing her up. During the negotiation of how many tries Peter would get to pick a dress, Maude turned to the audience saying things like "one is too little, I want him to make it, but is three too much, like I am throwing myself at him?" After Peter had picked the wrong dress twice, Maude was thinking "please, pick the green one, the green one," which Peter of course did.

If the characters' thoughts are spoken out loud, there is suddenly much more information to act on, and certain characters and scenes become much more interesting to play. By not making entire scenes about the inner play, the game stays agile. Of course, it is perfectly possible to make a game that is played largely in the form of monologues, and make action in the actual play comments on the monologues.

Fun, Not Funny

For players, game masters and game wrights[1] alike, it is important to realise that you can have fun even though the story is not funny. Funny is often the easiest way out, and the easy road only stretches that far.

When using techniques that rely heavily on meta play things, it is very tempting to start making jokes. People laughing at the fact that it is the fat guy that plays the slender gal or people making shrewd in-game references to a situation that took place earlier today in school. This is all good and well, but don't get stuck in it.

What is a comedy role-play? Does the comedy lie in how crazy the action is in the eyes of the players (as in the *Fawlty Towers*-esque *Badehotellet* (2006)), or would the characters themselves be laughing if they could watch the game?

A lot of players I've met over the years have had trouble taking role-playing seriously. People having trouble letting go of the fact that we're really just people pretending. But more importantly, a lot of players are afraid of taking role-playing seriously because of the fear of sucking: if someone has pretensions, it is actually possible to fail. While this is true, sucking hardly ever matters. And the pain of sucking is so little in relation to the adrenaline kick of nailing the game. If you can't get players to shape up, avoid them. And tell them why.

Pretension is not a bad thing. Wanting to achieve something, whether it is "I want to write a game about staying or breaking up in a long relationship because that's where most of my friends are in their lives right now" or "let's examine what happens if our paladins are cowards that always back away from fights," will make your game more interesting than just playing aimlessly to see what happens.

As should be apparent to most readers of this book, role-playing is a medium of expression, just like painting, creative writing or shooting movies. We can do stuff with role-playing, therapy for ourselves and our friends, exploring our prejudices about a certain topic, make political games about stupidity and racism and whatnot. These things are going to be fun, even if you are

1 Game master being the person or persons running a game and the game wright being the person or persons conceiving, designing and writing up the game. In many countries these are generally the same persons, but at most Swedish and Danish cons, game wrights write self-contained games which are run in parallel by multiple game masters.

not laughing even once (but please do). Having the balls to take it seriously, having and showing pretension and not taking the easy way out is going to make more great scenarios. And I want to play great scenarios.

Conclusion

I have tried to cover the basic ideas of jeepform, and in doing so, I have left out descriptions of techniques that can be found in greater abundance on the net. Jeep games use a lot of tricks to get where they want to; there are techniques such as *allegoric play* (dancing to symbolise sex), *contextualisation* (pause and play a scene that explains something about the current scene), *character pools* (anyone may pick any of the seven dwarves at any time), *fast forward* ("10 minutes later, crying!"), *inside/outsides*, repetition (playing a scene over and over with different input or from different angles), *sitting and standing play* (using different stances to allow the game to be carried out at several levels simultaneously), *the superman system* (start with a defining moment later in the game, and then from the beginning), and so forth. Descriptions of these and more can be found on the website of *Vi åker jeep*[1]. Jeepform is one incarnation of freeform, and the label likely fits more games and people than those officially using the jeep moniker. The original reason for using the name jeepform rather than freeform was so that Google could find it – the term freeform has become terribly overloaded over the years.

Jeepform playing style is certainly related to improvisational theatre. From an outsider's point of view, the two activities might even be indistinguishable. To my mind, the big difference is in the mindset of the players: Jeepform is still role-playing and approaches story-telling from a roleplaying perspective by using a lot of improv tools (a lot of good stuff can be ported straight to role-playing from improv). Improv does not become role-playing if you add rocks-papers-scissors and hit points.

For those wanting to dig deeper, the *Vi åker jeep* website is a great source of games in Scandinavian and English as well as a dictionary of techniques and lists of pungent "truths" about freeform and jeepform role-playing. All games are runnable by anyone who has printed the booklet from the PDF, as is common in the tradition of Swedish and Danish convention games.

And remember that how you tell the story is as important as the story itself.

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Markus Montola

The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing

The article that's about to make you smarter covers two games which are exploring, in quite different ways, the joy of immersing yourself in feeling like shit. There are some people for whom this concept does not make sense, and even people calling themselves scientists who claim that Markus' research on these kinds of games is unethical, as are the games. Neither is true.

This article is a great tool for understanding the drive of players of these kinds of games. In my book, this is essential knowledge for anyone interested in games, or anyone thinking seriously about doing game design. (It may even tempt you to play the games themselves.)

As this article will show you, there is real value in the synthesising of emotions and experiences through artificial means, regardless of their nature, and interesting consequences of transparency from the game designer. The quotes alone make this a great read, but true to form, Markus' conjunctions around them are the big take-away. The conclusion, which I will not spoil here, is every bit as true today.

— Tobias Wrigstad

Fun is often seen a necessary gratification for recreational games. This paper studies two freeform role-playing games aiming to create extremely intense experiences of tragedy, horror, disgust, powerlessness and self-loathing, in order to gratify the self-selected group of experienced role-players. Almost all of the 15 interviewed players appreciated their experiences, despite crying, experiencing physiological stress reactions and feeling generally "bad" during the play.

Introduction

It is frequently argued that games are supposed to be fun. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines games as activities – engaged in for diversion or amusement. Some academics subscribe to similar views: e.g. Juul [9] claims that it is "hard to imagine" a game based on *Anna Karenina*, since players want to identify with the protagonist and feel attached to positive outcome of the game. More recently, however, Wilson and Sicart [20] have criticized game design practices for producing "monologic play" that does not challenge the player, but only aims at immediate and continuous satisfaction. They list some games that have contested the paradigm of fun, such as *Dark Room Sex Game*, *Desert Bus* and *PainStation*. However, the players of such conceptual games have rarely been studied. I argue that a demand exists for a broader expressive repertoire, as has recently been demonstrated through the commercial and critical success of *Heavy Rain*.

This paper explores gratifying but "negative" play experiences elicited by two *freeform role-playing games*. My goal is to further challenge the claims that games are, and should be, an inherently light-hearted and "fun" form of culture, by exploring other gratifications of play.

There is limited research on these kinds of games and experiences. Hopeametsä [7] studied the *positive negative experience* in the larp *Ground Zero*, by analyzing written player debriefs. This larp was an alternate history based on the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the characters experienced an all-out nuclear war in a bomb shelter: They listen to horrific newscasts about the East Coast being devastated until they lose electricity. At some point a bomb hits the city above the shelter, with roaring sound effects. The characters are left in the darkness for countless hours, to digest the fact that the world they once knew is no more.

> The player debriefs testify that the game was an intensive, claustrophobic and distressing experience, but also an experience that the players considered a remarkably good one, and one from which they have learned many positive things. [...] The players experienced very real emotions and reactions to fictional events, and they also learned from these "fictitious" experiences. [7]

This paper explores the positive negative experiences further, studying them in short and repeatable role-playing games lacking physical or audiovisual elements that support immersion. Revisiting the theme is also necessary, as Hopeametsä's studied non-anonymous player debriefs written directly for game organizers.

Extreme Role-Playing and the Bleed Ideal

Players have enjoyed hopelessness, horror and tragedy in role-playing games for a long time. Popular pen'n'paper role-playing games with such themes include the classic *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), and the highly successful *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). Live-action role-playing has explored also themes such as nuclear holocaust, in *Ground Zero* [7], and tragedy in larp adaptation of *Hamlet* [10].

The games I will study need to be understood in their cultural context: these are games created by the players for themselves. Nordic Freeform is typically played in and around Danish and Swedish role-playing conventions. The games discussed in this paper were *premiered* in

Fastaval, Denmark, a convention known for games that do not shy away from mature themes. For example, in Fastaval 2010 the jury awarded the prize for the best game to *Vasen* (Bækgaard, 2010), a Joseph Fritzl -inspired scenario about a community tiptoeing around implied child molestation, while *The Journey* (Axelzon, 2010), described below, was voted as the best game by the players of the same event.

Many participants of these events are "regular" role-players who come to the conventions seeking new experiences:

> When I was younger I played all the games like this I could get my hands on. Now it's more like I play one a year, and then I play bad role-playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at home. (*TJ*, The Mother-C)

Nordic freeform role-playing is a mixture of larp, tabletop role-playing and improvisational theatre: costumes are not used, play occurs in one room with a game master, and the players are the only audience of the performance [see 21, 22]. While freeform generally adheres to the *invisible rules of role-playing* [15], the form of role-playing is tailored for the needs of each particular game. Freeform *scenarios* are often written down in a replayable form.

The extreme role-playing studied in this paper aims to influence not only the character, but also the player. The two studied games were created by the Vi åker jeep designer collective who describe the *bleed* ideal as follows[1]:

> Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent. [...] Bleed is instrumental for horror role-playing: It is often harder to scare the player through the character than the other way around. [...] A classic example of bleed is when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character.

Essentially, bleed play is *brink play* [18], in which the *magic circle of play* [19, 16, 1] serves as a social alibi for non-ordinary things. Bleed designs aim to simultaneously maintain a sense of alibi, and to weaken the *protective frame* [1] of play in order to explore powerful emotions.

The concept of bleed has not been psychologically defined, and has not always been used consistently. In this paper it is seen as a *design rhetoric* that has common ground with concepts such as character immersion [17], flow [7] and engrossment [5].

If play is seen as something surrounded by an *interaction membrane* [6], the aim of bleed play is to balance between safe and raw experiences. *Bleed in* occurs when a players' ordinary lives influence the game, while *bleed out* occurs when the game influences players despite the protective framing. This paper focuses on bleed out, and especially the *direct bleed* that happens when games elicit responses in players that resemble those of their fictional characters. Direct bleed is similar to character immersion [see 17].

The bleed rhetoric is sometimes used to describe strong feelings that do *not* correspond to characters' diegetic feelings: e.g. when a player feels guilt over the actions of a remorseless character. This can be called *indirect bleed*.

As bleed is based on a double consciousness: players both acknowledge and deny the nature of play, it is similar to the *this is not a game* principle [12]. However, bleed is inverse to TINAG: bleed players pretend to believe that *this is just a game*, holding on to the alibi while forfeiting some of the protection. In the design of these games,

1 http://jeepen.org/dict/index.html#-bleed, ref. April 2010 [also 22].

numerous strategies are used to elicit and intensify bleed such as taboo-breaking behavior, eye contact, guilt and disgust.

The Games under Study

This study focuses on two games, *Gang Rape* (Wrigstad, 2008) and *The Journey*. *GR* was chosen because it is considered a strong game that aims for extreme experiences through simple rules. As Aronson [2] points out in the context of planning social psychological experiments, intense experiments produce clearer results than less intense ones. *GR* plays out in some two hours. *The Journey* was chosen to complement the analysis, as it was perceived to be a much easier game to participate in. It uses similar strategies in much less stigmatized form, while still being intense enough to elicit powerful responses. The author also played *The Journey* before including it in this study.

Gang Rape

Gang Rape is an intentionally repulsive short scenario that examines gang rape as a particularly ugly form of violence. It plays out in three scenes: An introduction leading to a rape, the act itself, and a short epilogue. All the scenes are played in different ways: The scene leading to the rape is played in a fashion similar to larp, the rape is played in a fashion similar to tabletop role-playing (no touching), and the aftermath is narrated or played in a larp style.

Numerous game mechanics are used to create as intense emotional experience as possible. For instance, when the Rapists are describing their actions to the Victim during the rape, they are not allowed to hesitate, pause, or repeat themselves. Additionally they have to maintain continuous eye contact with the Victim. As another example, the players are required to choose the time and place of the rape and must also be able to personally relate to the setting. Also, the characters are paper-thin so as to discourage players from "hiding" behind them.

These design decisions aim to maximize bleed effects, making it harder for players to emotionally detach themselves from the themes of the game.

Gang Rape is played without a game master, but the rules provided in the booklet (Figure 1) are precise on how the game should be managed and run. For instance, during the rape, the Rapist players are given all power over what happens in the physical world of the game, but the Victim is, importantly, provided with narrative power to dictate and describe the Rapists' feelings and reactions to the act. There are no secrets in the game; everyone must read the entire instruction booklet through before beginning. The rules also dictate that it must only be played in a serious manner.

As a critical game, *GR* is a political comment on the difficulty of obtaining gang rape convictions in the Swedish legal system, and a demonstration of the fact that "we all have the capacity to fantasize about these things".

The Journey

The Journey is a post-apocalyptic role-playing game inspired by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, for four players and a game master. The characters are on a journey: The Stranger guides the group, and The Man protects The Mother, who takes care of The Daughter. The three-hour scenario consists of 26 scenes. Each player receives instructions for each scene. As they play their parts, an interactive play is pieced together, with players interpreting their characters and, adding nuance and details to the predetermined narrative structure.

The characters experience desperation in a destroyed world: The Stranger takes The Mother as his reluctant lover from The Man, as a show of masculinity and a price for protec-tion. The Daughter grows too ill to continue the journey, and she is abandoned – but as the winter grows worse, the others have to return to her. Hunger becomes unbearable, so The Stranger murders The Daughter, and she is eaten in or-



If you appreciated this game, ***please*** donate a few bucks to some local and related charity!

Gang rape.

— a grown-up game

Idea, text & layout Tobias Wrigstad

Layout concept Frederik Berg Olsen

Photo Caroline Holgersson

With assistance from Thorbiörn Fritzon, Jonas Harild, Frederik Berg Olsen, Emily Care Boss, Emma Björnehed, Olle Jonsson & J. Tuomas Harviainen

No. players One victim, two rapists, preferably more

Game masters None

Playing time 45-90 minutes, depending on number of rapists

Web jeepen.org/games/gr | jeepen.org | jeepen.org/dict

Figure 1: Gang Rape instructions booklet

der to survive. Later, The Man is injured and also left behind, as The Mother goes on with The Stranger.

One way of reading *The Journey* is through the ways in which The Man and The Mother deal with the post-apocalyptic horrors: The Man becomes a broken and petrified victim like The Daughter, while The Mother turns into a monster similar to The Stranger. Powerlessness is a central theme, as The Mother is unable to protect The Daughter, and The Man is unable to protect The Mother.

The GM is instructed to create a quiet, ominous experience:

> The focus of the game is to interpret an ominous feeling with brusque dialogues and an ever-present silence. [...] The atmosphere should be almost poetical and tranquil but intimidating and furthermost the pressure of the omnipresent secluded silence.

The Journey starts bleak and keeps getting darker.

Similar Games

Gang Rape and *The Journey* do not exist in isolation, but in a larger tradition of bleed-themed games. Two examples:

Fat Man Down (Østergaard, 2009) is a game about obesity in society, aiming to create bleed by casting "the fattest male player" in the role of Fat Man. The game is about obesity destroying his life. In the game, the other players' improvised play

turns into personal attacks against the obese player. However, the game is intended to be much harder for the tormentors than to the Fat Man [see 20].

The Mothers (Østergaard, 2007) is about two meetings of a new mothers' support group. The first meeting is about happy façades. In the second meeting, a bit later, they have become disillusioned and are trying to come to terms with their new lives – except for one of them, who was honest even in the first meeting. The game turns into an all-against-one aggression as the others vent their frustrations to the happy mother. The "new horror" game ends when the player of the happy mother decides to walk out of the game.

Research Method and Data Collection

As each of these games only gathers an audience of a few dozen players, it is methodologically challenging to study them. Data was collected from a variety of sources, in order to richly describe not only what these games are and how they function, but also to gain insight on the motivations behind their design, on how they are experienced, and on the reasons of playing them in the first place.

The data collection involved interviews with players and one designer, participation in a session of *The Journey*, and analysis of game materials of several games. 15 players were interviewed: five with an e-mail questionnaire with a round of follow-up questions, eight in person, using semi-structured interviews, and two as a pair interview. Ten players were interviewed on *Gang Rape*, and five on *The Journey*. With the exception of four *GR* players, who had played the game more than a year ago, all interviews were conducted within a week of play. The author of *GR* was interviewed both as a designer and as a player, but his player interview is not cited. The interviewees were given an opportunity to comment a draft version of this paper.

Interviewees were contacted in Knutepunkt 2009, Norway; Fastaval 2010, Denmark; and Knutpunkt 2010, Sweden. In the case of *GR*, every player that could be reached was interviewed. For *The Journey*, the players of The Man and The Mother were targeted, based on the hypothesis that those roles were the most likely to produce positive negative experiences. The *GR* sample consisted of two female Victims, one male Victim and seven male Rapists, *The Journey* interviewees included two female players of The Mother, one male player of The Mother, and two male players of The Man. Altogether, they had played in four instances of *GR* and five of *The Journey*.

The interviewees were aged 19-42, typically 30. Six were Danish, four Swedish, and the rest from five other countries. They were very experienced role-players, often with 10-20 years of role-playing experience. No other commonalities in backgrounds were identified.

The interview protocol, both for email as well as in-person, consisted of 20 questions designed to elicit responses regarding the positive negative experiences as well as provide a sense of the overall experience of playing these games. Sample questions include:

- Please describe the events of the game? What happened in the different scenes of the game?
- Please describe the hardest moment(s) of the game? Why was it hard?
- How have you felt about the game afterwards?

No games were staged (or created) for this study: All informants had played them before being contacted.

Findings

The interview responses saturated quickly, partially because of the *self-selection* of the target group. This was especially the case for the *Gang Rape* players since they had

all read through the entire booklet before opting to play. All interviewees were articulate and reflective of their role-playing. In addition to describing their experiences, they also suggested analyses of them. Thus, this study should be viewed as a collection of experts' insights. These insights will be grouped under different themes. All interview quotes have been edited for clarity and anonymity.

Extreme Positive Negative Experiences

All players played these games to experience positive negative experiences, similar to those described by Hopeametsä. This goal was very explicit. Almost all players praised them as gratifying and powerful experiences. They were not considered fun, but the players described various gratifying moods and emotions.

> It was cruel. And that touched something. It's the first scenario where I've actually had tears in my eyes most of the time. [...] made me feel like crap. (*TJ*, The Mother-A)

> Having to keep eye contact was extremely scary but I think it was also a very safe thing. Noticing the reactions of the other player (not character!!!) added significantly to my own emotions. Also the fact that once you started talking you couldn´t stop [...] added stress and adrenaline. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> Not only was I disgusted what I did come up with, I also felt very strong sense of inadequacy and impotence on not being able to come up with more shit, and not being able to perform [better and without repeating myself] [...] since this is about intercourse, and across of me is a rather beautiful girl, which I'm looking straight into the eyes, of course [...] a sense of arousal. So there's arousal, there's impotence, and there's disgust, at the same time. So you can see why that leaves you feeling rather brainfucked. And that's the [power] of that game, the simple mecha-nisms are able to create all these three. (*GR*, Rapist-4)

Players typically tried to make *Gang Rape* as intense as possible: For instance, players often chose the roles that they assumed to be the most difficult ones to play:

> I thought that the Victim was going to be the hardest one for me to portray, so of course I wanted to go for the biggest challenge. (*GR*, Victim-8)

> I think I said something like "if it'd be okay with you guys, I would like to play the Rapist because I think that would be the biggest challenge for me". (*GR*, Rapist-6)

A few players analyzed their immersion and detachment from the game spontaneously, saying that they could control their attachment consciously, thus regulating the intensity of the game. Two players were disappointed with *GR*, as it was less intense than they had expected: one of them expressing a wish to play it again, to make it harder.

The emotional repertoire of especially *The Journey* was wide and detailed, ranging from melancholy to grief and from relief to desperation. Exploration of dark emotions was a frequent reason to play such games.

> I started playing [games with] focus on the emotional intensity and telling stories, which can be very dark and in which you can explore these darker sides of human nature and relationships, and for me it's similar to reading fiction or watching movies that bring up those same themes. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

The positive negative experience is, of course, an intentional design goal.

> I wanted people to feel a little bit dirty, like have a bad feeling in their stomachs. I wanted people to be baffled over what came out of their mouths.

> And I wanted the potential for some really raw, really rough, really scary role-playing which could essentially take you anywhere. [...] Not all games should be fun. [...] What I'm looking for is strong emotions, and whether they are negative or positive is of less importance. (Wrigstad, interview)

In light of the interviews, *GR* met those design goals better than expected.

First Person Audience

As Hopeametsä [7] notes, role-playing produces powerful positive negative experiences through making players experience the events themselves, instead of just watching them unfold.

> But you get a different relationship, because you are playing characters and interacting with characters in a way you don't when reading a story. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

Both games under scrutiny drive the characters into acts that the players consider disgusting, strange or unnatural. This discrepancy causes intense *cognitive dissonance*, a "feeling of discomfort [...] caused by performing an action that is discrepant from one's customary, typically positive self-conception" [3, 2, cf. 4].

Numerous design strategies are employed to intensify the dissonance: While structures of play are used as a social alibi to enable players to commit discrepant acts, those structures are left very "thin" in order to prevent negotiating the dissonance: *Gang Rape* uses player characters as an excuse for a horrible act, but they are intentionally superficial to prevent the players from distancing themselves from their actions.

While *GR* uses taboo activities and horror to cause dissonance, the determinism and pre-defined nature of *The Journey* plays on helplessness:

> I've never had such a [strong] desire to change things. (*TJ*, The Mother-A)

The deterministic nature of *The Journey* disempowers the players in a way that resonates with the intended feeling of helplessness. Players are left to figure out the How:s and the Why:s, as only the What:s are given.

The cognitive dissonance produced through experiencing positive negative experiences in first person is not a problem for these games: In fact it is an implicit design goal and a reason for players to participate.

Physical Experiences

The cognitive dissonance and emotional intensity of these games elicited physical reactions in most interviewees.

> I think I was shaking towards the end of the rape part and I couldn't stop during lunch afterwards (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> I was wringing my hands, it was hard to sit still. [...] I almost threw up for real. [...] I had mental images of the mutilated body, because we played that scene rather thoroughly. [...] I have gagged and actually almost thrown up during other scenarios, but only when there's an emotional element. (*TJ*, The Mother-A)

> [I was] perspiring for the whole game. And I get really nervous, I tend to get really cold, so I was freezing by the time the game was over. Which was great for the game. You get that nervousness where your heart starts going a little faster and your hands are really shaky and you get really anxious. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

Such discomfort was considered a somewhat scary, but not an unpleasant thing. Many players considered them, at least implicitly, desirable indicators of a powerful experience.

> It's an uncomfortable thing, but that doesn't necessarily make it bad. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

> I had witnessed how other participants of the game experienced shakings and all sort of nerve malfunctions, resulting of tension and anxiety, and waited to find the equivalents of these phenomena on myself, but could not notice any. (*GR*, Rapist-7)

Some players visualized and felt their experiences very vividly, while others commented that they do not "see things" in role-playing games.

> The blood and sweat and cum and vomit felt very real [...] The smells, the taste in my mouth, the heat and fluids against my skin, all felt intensely real, even though this part was only talked through. (Rapist-1)

Some players, of both Victim and Rapist roles, reported sexual arousal in *Gang Rape*. For example:

> [R]ather against my will, I found it at times arousing and sometimes even erotic. That did feel quite out of place. (*GR*, Victim-9)

In a fashion typical to immersive experiences, numerous players reported having lost the sense of passage of time:

> [The rape itself lasted] 20 minutes maybe, 15 minutes I think. [...] It really feels like hours. (*GR*, Rapist-2)

This intensity is similar to the stress and anxiety elicited by some laboratory experiments in social psychology. For example in Stanley Milgram's [13, 14] famous obedience experiment the informants were lead to believe that they were administering painful and dangerous electrical shocks to other informants.[1]

> I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter and obeyed to the end. [13]

While there is an obvious difference of *GR* and *The Journey* participants being keenly aware of the playful nature of their activity, a similarity exists in terms of cognitive dissonance. Even with the intense stress, however, 84% of Milgram's participants were "glad" or "very glad" that they had participated in the experiment, and only 1.3% were "sorry" or "very sorry". 74% of them felt that they had learned something of personal importance [14]. While the ethics of Milgram's experiment have been criticized, the follow-up study supports the gratifying potential of similar "unpleasant|" dissonant and stressful experiences.

Experiences of New Insights

The interviewees were generally critical towards role-playing as an accurate simulation, many felt that it would be even audacious to claim to understand how it feels to be raped or to abandon a child after playing a game.

> Obviously I have no freaking clue of what rape really is. (*GR*, Rapist-6)

Despite the critical stance, experiences of personal insight were a common reason of playing rough games.

1 In a sense, Milgram's experiment could be seen as a small pervasive larp featuring unaware participation [see 16].

> I want to get better at being with people. And I think a part of that is sort of also experiencing yourself better. In the terms of like discovering your limitations and where you can't go. And I also want to push myself. (*GR*, Rapist-6)

> [We role-play for] the stories to tell and the skills we gain [...] every day I live my life, I go for new experience. (*TJ*, The Mother-C)

> [I want to play] everything that transcends your body and will be a lasting memory. Not just a game, but will actually become something more. (*GR*, Victim-8)

Most informants also felt they had learned something from the games, or discussed such insights.

> I am most certainly happy that I played it. It was very worthwhile experience and definitely the most intense game I have ever played. (*GR*, Victim-9)

> I currently think of The Man as the embodiment of the defects of character I despise in conformist people. (*TJ*, The Man-E)

> I enjoyed playing it. ...yeah, it's a bad attitude to have about rape, but...you'll learn more about rape if you play this game. (*GR*, Rapist-5)

The insights of *Gang Rape* were especially about peer pressure and self-loathing, while *The Journey* gave insights on masculinity and powerlessness, and about moral dilemmas such as cannibalism and futile sacrifices. One player also felt that *GR* allowed them to reflect, in a good way, an actual experience of having been pressured to have sex.

Even the people who have opted to not play the game after reading the booklet are often inspired to discuss their personal feelings and experiences related to the theme:

> I'm asked to run the game for an all-girl group [...] it takes them two hours to convince themselves that tonight is not really a good night. [...] they are all looking to me to be the person to push them. And of course I will not push them because I think it's unethical. [...] I think that was probably the most successful run of the game: Because first there was the two hours of talking about the game [...]. And these discussions all had to do with rape [...] At some point one girl started [...] talking about situations when she felt that she had pushed men to go further in sexual actions than they were prepared. And this just went on the entire night. [...] That's for me a good run of *Gang Rape*. (Wrigstad, interview)

Effects on Personal Relationships

Most of the players felt an intense and intimate connection with at least some of the other players. This happened regardless of whether the players were opposed (Rapist vs. Victim) or allied (The Man and The Daughter) in the game.

> Afterwards there definitely is a special bond between us, as always happens in nice larp experiences, but in this case there was a horrible secret that we had shared and no-one else in the world could ever understand. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> I felt a lot closer to the other two players even though I did not know anything more about them. (*GR*, Victim-9)

> I feel like there is some value to it [...] in the bonds we create when we help each other to exchange weak or dark parts of our minds, and to acknowledge and explore those sides of us. (*TJ*, The Man-D)

As Huizinga [8] already noted, play has the tendency to build communities. In the case of these extreme games, intimate bonds are created quickly.

However, the inverse also happened: In both games, a few players were also left with negative feelings towards some of the

antagonists that lingered on for at least a few days.

> I was afraid to look right at The Stranger's face (and still was somehow afraid of the player long after the game was over). (*TJ*, The Man-E).

The players expressed a need for mutual support to be able to play these games, and felt a need to be sure that all participants invested in the experience.

> We also went through all the rules [...] before the game and that´s when I started to feel a bit nervous, not sure about what I had gotten myself into. Thanks to the other players' support and the fact that they shared my feelings helped me get through the experience. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> Right before the game, one players bluntly asked about how we felt and one other quite openly admitted to being scared. (*GR*, Victim-9)

Indeed, *Gang Rape* and *The Journey* should not be seen as typical *player vs. player* games, and the cruelty was almost always discussed in the discourse of collaborative push for intensity. For instance, in a pair interview, a Victim reported using the rules-given power to control Rapists' emotions to push one of them to prolong the rape:

> **Victim**: I saw you sort of struggle, and I was also forcing myself to let you be the horrible one. So I was like no, this was just way too short, this is not horrible enough, we have to keep on to get the complete feeling of it. [...] So that's why I pushed you, and I hope that was okay for you, because I could see you go "No!"
>
> **Rapist**: Well, I'm alive so it's all good. But I sincerely hated that situation. Not because of you, but just—
>
> **Victim**: You're welcome. (laughing)
>
> **Rapist**: Thanks. (dryly) (*GR*)

In understanding the social dynamics of the game, it is central to note that the Victim is also an active participant who intensifies the cognitive dissonance and chips off the deindividuation of the Rapists. Another Victim even felt *empowered* by the role, being able to get back to Rapists (in a way not reflecting the reality of rape).

The Point of No Return

The players of these games sign up for powerful experiences. The players, especially of *Gang Rape*, considered their duty to provide each other with such experiences, pushing each other and trying to intensify the game. Additionally, some players said that quitting the game abruptly might have felt worse than playing it through; they wanted to endure through the game to not be denied the feelings of completion and triumph of surviving through it. These logics make it difficult to walk out of the game, and make safeword techniques an unreliable safety valve:

> This became very clear during gameplay, you might call it an insight about gang raping, that once you´re in it, there is no way back, and you even stop thinking about anything that happens and just focus on getting to the end of the act and the game. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> I often felt like I did not want to be there anymore but I never felt like walking out or breaking game. On the contrary, breaking game would have caused me to face much sooner and more strongly the conflicting feelings brought on by the game. It felt like all or nothing. Play through or don't play. (*TJ*, The Man-D)

No-one had quit *GR* after starting to play: The players know what they are signing up for. It can also be speculated that the often-reported senses of completion and relief in the end of the game somehow moderate the phase where the players have to deal with the cognitive dissonance in a

new way as the game ends and they step out from the protective framework of play.

No interviewee expressed regret over playing *GR*. However, *The Journey* is not explicit about its content and intensity beforehand: For example the intense feelings of powerlessness, submission and loss of masculinity that are poured on The Man can bleed out very roughly.

> I don't regret doing it but I could have done without it. I have been asked to game master it for friends but I am not sure I want to help them feel so bad for three hours plus the rest of an evening. I think it is a brilliant game. (*TJ*, The Man-D)

In one instance, the player of The Man (not interviewed) quit *The Journey* quite early on, and the game master took the role.[1] Another player of the same character played it through, but reported an extremely unpleasant experience, not in the positive negative fashion.

> I forced myself to put up with what the game was asking of me. "Forcing" [...] because it felt overall... painful. Over the course of the game, I cried a lot and had to take frequent (if very short) breaks to ease my breathing. [...] I considered walking out of the game, but couldn't resolve to – possibly out of respect for the other players, who were performing very well [...] I hated *The Journey* and still have bad feelings toward it. (*TJ*, The Man-E)

It is a topic for a future study to understand the elements of bleed that determine whether a player gets a negative experience instead of a positive negative one. One common denominator seems to be that the players loathe and have hard time to understand his inaction.

Debrief and Recovery

Especially the players of *Gang Rape* made a significant point to debrief their experience properly together.

> It took a lot of hugs and a lot of talking a lot of debriefing for ourselves before we could actually get down to earth (*GR*, Rapist-2)

> We had two debriefs. The first one was immediately [...] for about 10-15 minutes. The second one happened [10 hours later]. Both debriefs were absolutely vital, the most important part of the game [...] The immediate debrief made us relax with each other, knowing that we were all ok. The second where the author joined took place when you had had some time to reflect on the game and could provide a better analysis of your own experience. Would any of these two debriefs have been left out, we surely wouldn't have coped as well afterwards. (*GR*, Rapist-1)

> We actually didn't have a debriefing [due to practical reasons.] I actually wanted to debrief with the other participants, and regret we couldn't. (*TJ*, The Man-E)

The Rapist players also needed debriefing, but one of them observed that most of the attention was in taking care of the victim. To that player, the feelings of guilt also made it hard to request attention. Another commented:

> I also needed a hug, but there was nobody around that I really wanted a hug from, so I ended up protecting my space and keeping distance. (*GR*, Rapist-7)

Several informants mentioned that debriefing with an outsider was, or would have been valuable after the game. Many

1 In early informant recruitment, one person also declined an interview on Fat Man Down, due to a bad experience.

also found the research interviews a valuable opportunity to talk one more time about their experiences:

I'm really glad that I had this interview. [...] I found myself throughout the last few days continuously going back, and thinking about it. [...] It's been really good for me to be able to sit down and talk about these things, and also to think about [...] why this can be a good experience even if it's not a fun experience. (*TJ*, The Mother-B)

In this sense, the live interviews also served many informants in a fashion of debriefing discussed by Milgram [14] and recommended by e.g. Aronson [2]. Most email interviewees, however, noted that they had taken several breaks from the questionnaire, due to mental exhaustion.

The Ethics and Dangers of Extreme Role-Play

Discussing the ethics of this kind of play would require much more space than is available here, but it suffices to say that especially *Gang Rape* has several rules that ensure that all participants are able to make as informed decision as possible about participation. The case of *The Journey* is more complicated, as the players only learn about the themes and intensity during play. None of the players found *GR* unethical, and some even found it valuable and important, encouraging this study.

> The only thing that you felt when you finished it was "how can this happen", "how can this not be considered a crime", basically – even though [my character] chose not to do anything [to prosecute the rapists] because there is all the shame and the –this cannot happen to me‖ thinking. [...] I think the ethical problem comes when you refuse to deal with these kinds of issues, or do these kinds of games, due to "ethical considerations". (*GR*, Victim-10)

The serious stance and harsh style of these games were found to contribute to their ethicality:

> **Victim**: And I think it's actually ethical, in the sense that it is [tough]. If we had played it and then been able to laugh at it, I think that would have been more unethical.
>
> **Rapist**: Yes, that would've been horrible. (*GR*)
>
> I think *The Journey* treated its kills with respect, and the whole tone of the game was very mature and respectful. (*TJ*, The Mother-C)

As the sample of the study is small, it is impossible to comment on the psychological safety of these games. *The Journey* certainly caused bad experiences, but were they harmful or merely unpleasant? The community emphasizes the need for proper debriefing. Looking for a similar precedent from social psychology, it should be stated that in a follow-up study to Milgram's experiment, an impartial medical examiner interviewed 40 of his participants afterwards, finding no evidence of traumatic reactions [14].

The controversial theme makes *GR* a stigmatizing game to play: In one instance the players even reported a social stigmatization similar to *victim blaming* from outsiders. Similarly, researching the game carries the risk of stigmatization for the author of this paper.

Conclusion

The players studied in this paper belong to a subculture of gamers that is convinced of the value of non-fun games. They aim for intense experiences, regardless of their supposed emotional valence, and for them, the value of negative emotions is larger than just giving meaning to the subsequent positive twists. The fact that people enjoy things that they are not supposed to enjoy – as Apter [1] puts it – is not a revolutionary discovery. However, in the context of

game studies, such enjoyment has received little attention.

As a cultural form, this kind of role-playing is not unlike movies such as *The Schindler's List*: perhaps unpleasant on a momentary and superficial level, but rewarding through experiences of learning, insight and accomplishment. The expressive power of horror, disgust, guilt and cognitive dissonance is used in a fashion not unlike splatter movies or *Fear Factor*. These games can be seen as social *bungee jumping*, as simulations of extreme experiences that can elicit physiological stress responses in a gratifying manner. Like extreme sports, they can also promote fellowship among participants.

The Journey and *Gang Rape* are direct and close descendants of role-playing games. In light of most game definitions [9], calling them "games" is suspect: Even though the interviewees systematically used the word, many did so with mixed feelings: *The Journey* was considered quite linear for a game – it is roughly as linear as *Lego Star Wars* – but the term was found more suitable for *Gang Rape*.

The question of gameness is secondary, however: The obvious conclusion is that the scope of playful experiences is broader than most models suggest [cf. 11], and that the digital games industry has a lot to learn in the art of gratifying through positive negative experiences.

Acknowledgements

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Simo Järvelä

The Golden Rule of Larp

The aim of this article was to demonstrate how the seemingly clear cut assumption of informed consent among larpers can be problematic in several ways. The exact definitions of key concepts were left out on purpose as the aim was to provide a simple and approachable text for everyone and not just the academically inclined. If I had realized at the time of writing that many people seem to have a severe aversion towards Zimbardo and Stanford Prison Experiment, I would have written in more depth about how systemic features can direct situations into unpleasant and unforeseen territories despite everyone's best intentions. I also feel that I should have emphasized how unfamiliar even experienced players are with their own behaviour and emotional reactions in more stressful conditions, but I did not find a way to do that without sounding condescending. The next step would be to provide practical guidelines how to take into account those factors that prohibit informed consent when designing larps. The trust in the Golden Rule should be enabled by design, not presumed.

— Simo Järvelä



Dragging a headless body out of the woods in Neonhämärä. (Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen)

The ethicality and safety of larp is often taken for granted. Participating voluntarily is taken as a sign of agreement that you are willing to endure what is going happen. While the vast majority of larps are entirely safe, simply assuming so is potentially dangerous. There are social dynamics involved, that all responsible organizers and players should take into account.

This essay is about ethical considerations in larps. They are closely related to safety issues, both mental and physical. While the risk increases, it usually becomes more and more ethically questionable. Questionable does not necessarily mean unethical – often the risk level rises and nothing bad happens and the increased risk is constantly acknowledged by all participants. Some levels of risk could be deemed unethical even if nothing bad happens. This issue is not black and white, it's more about odds, questioning what's being done and awareness of what is about to take place. Everyone draws his or her own line somewhere.

The Golden Rule

The primary basis of larp ethics is: things *informed adults do consensually amongst themselves* are acceptable. The idea is that if everyone involved knows what they are getting into and they voluntarily participate, whatever then happens is morally acceptable. It is the same basic idea as in sadomasochism or boxing. The two main areas in larp where questions of ethics and safety mostly arise are naturally sex and violence, and their handling in the game.

The criterion is fourfold:

1. Informed – The prerequisite of doing anything consensually is being informed about what is going to happen.

2. Adults – Mostly a legal issue; the person must be able to decide for himself.

3. Consensually – No one should be forced to do anything she is not willing to do. This agreement can be explicit or implicit – so can disagreement. The acceptance must be continuous.

4. Amongst themselves – Outsiders tend not to be either informed or consensually participating in the game.

Dissecting the Rule

The above notion is a good rule of thumb to begin with and for most larps it is entirely adequate. However it does not automatically guarantee safety, and none of the

points above are as clear cut as they seem. Most problematic are the requirements of being informed and of consensus.

Being Informed

Being informed means that all participants have a good idea of what they are getting into. This is strongly built on presumptions based on previous larp experiences and the information provided by the organizers. It is typical, and often necessary to maximize the emotional impact of the game, that the organizers do not reveal everything beforehand. Controlling the amount of information is one of the most basic tools of game masters. The secret elements could include both the situations the participants will be put into and the manipulation techniques that will be used on them. In addition, the chaotic nature of larp will cause unforeseen dynamics in the game which cannot be completely taken into account beforehand. It is about odds.

There are strong assumptions that the larp will follow established and common dynamics very similar to previous larps, unless there is some information that would contradict this assumption. Typically games use rules for communicating the suitable boundaries and to guarantee safety. Most games have rules how to handle violence, but notably fewer games include rules concerning sex. When the game proceeds in a roughly familiar manner, most ethical questions have been solved already beforehand and no moral conflicts or safety issues arise. It is however possible that none of the organizers or participants could foresee where the game or a certain event goes.

In many games the organizers utilize powerful techniques (e.g. solitary confinement, dehumanization, deindividuation, authorities, separation from real world, social pressure etc.) adapted from various real world contexts (e.g. rituals, cults, prisons, war etc.)[1]. However, few organizers or participants are thoroughly familiar with those techniques, and their effectiveness can be easily overlooked in a well-intending attempt to create a powerful experience. Assumptions of inherent safety and naive or ignorant attitudes towards these techniques can lead to unwanted and questionable results.

Thinking that everyone will be safe just because no one wants to harm anyone and because everyone is a responsible adult is potentially a dangerous attitude. Situational forces can easily override personal qualities if the context is strong enough - which is the aim of most larps. Ultimately the biggest threat to informed consent is the unfamiliarity of and ignorance toward the manipulation techniques used. If the organizer or the participants are not aware of their potential, they cannot be informed.

Another aspect is that the players should constantly be aware of the dynamics in the situation. This is difficult as in a larp there is a strong emphasis on directing the whole capacity for attention of the players to the fiction, not the meta-analysis of the situation. It is especially challenging in intensive scenes that require a lot of cognitive resources from the players. The increased state of bodily activation, including increased adrenaline (and other hormones) levels, also hinders many cognitive processes, which makes it more or less impossible to retain a cool headed outsider per-

1 Larps have notable structural similarities to the classic Stanford Prison Experiment, which was a psychological study on how certain techniques can be used to create a situation that overwhelms personal dispositional attitudes of individuals. It is both inspirational and a cautionary tale for larp organizers. See Philip Zimbardo's The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil for a detailed description of the experiment.



City worshippers and a caged troll in an old telecommunication center in Neonhämärä. (Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen)

spective and evaluate ethics or safety issues objectively.

Case study 1: Gang Rape vs. Fat Man Down

Both of these games use powerful techniques to create an intense and uncomfortable experience for the players. The crucial difference between these games is that while every participant in *Gang Rape* must read all the material beforehand, in *Fat Man Down* there are nasty surprises and even abuse of trust regarding safety words. In *Gang Rape* everyone is informed of the techniques used and thus can imagine what the game will be like and participate consensually, while in *Fat Man Down* this is made impossible on purpose. The closing remarks of *Fat Man Down* clearly show that despite the apparent contradiction, it is made like this on purpose: ”Also make sure that everyone, especially the player playing the Fat Man, is in on what is going to happen. Ganging up on one player is a powerful tool, roleplay-wise as well as psychologically.” At the same time, it can also be argued that just reading the rules of *Gang Rape* does not prepare the participants thoroughly enough, as very few players are capable of imagining what that combination of game mechanics and themes will create just by reading the rules. Overall both of these games aim for such an extreme experience that extra caution is required to avoid unethical or unsafe choices. A clear difference in how informed the players are when playing makes *Fat Man Down* more questionable compared to *Gang Rape*. However, these are not the most unethical games around: they both clearly state their nature in the game material.

Case study 2: Gang Violence in Neonhämärä

In our street larp campaign *Neonhämärä* skinheads and trolls met in a remote parking lot to rumble. It was the middle of winter, minus 20 degrees, dark and the ground was covered in snow and ice. Headlights of

the cars were the only light source when roughly a dozen characters stood in two rows opposing each other and throwing insults to provoke the other side. Despite the build-up, the violence burst suddenly. In a few seconds the skinheads were beaten, and after a quick aftermath the trolls left.

I was playing one of the skinheads. It was intense. Afterwards the troll players reported various symptoms relating to very high bodily arousal states, such as tunnel vision, memory distortions and shakes after the adrenaline rush wore off. It was only then that I realized what the actual risk level of physical injury in that scene was. Nothing happened, but the risk was there. A bunch of players in a state where they are not in control of their finer motor actions and certainly not actively thinking about safety issues, wrestling on a icy ground. Excess force was used, and with just a little bit of bad luck people would have actually got hurt. Hurting other players definitely was not anyone's intention, quite the contrary, but the control that would ensure safety in such conditions was not there.

I wonder what would have happened if instead of being supporting cast the skinheads would have been played by players with equal amount at stake as the troll players? We were chatting and joking totally off-game, before the trolls arrived. No build up. What would have happened if we were as psyched up? Even with best intentions and among friends, intensive scenes elevate the risk level of physical injury.

Adults

This requirement, the age of consent, is technically a legal issue, meaning that the person is legible to participate and make autonomous decisions. However, it is also closely related to informed consent – with limited life experience one cannot be automatically presumed to be as informed about various dynamics and adult themes. This of course does not mean that underage persons (especially as this is not precisely an age issue) could not participate, just that some extra measures need to be taken. Also, naturally, not all content is suitable for all ages. The topic of ethics in children's larps or children in larps is vast and my lack of expertise on that field prevents it from being covered here thoroughly.

Consent

Consent is based on the information provided to participants (e.g. rules, game material) and by general assumptions. Continuous consent is an obvious requirement for ethical larping. It can be presumed that if participating in a larp, consent is given by default. It is when during the larp situations develop into a surprising and unwanted direction that consent is at stake.

Agreement on the suitable level of physical or psychological involvement requires communication. It is easiest to define limits before the playing starts, but some negotiation is always required during the actual play. That is challenging because often the aim in a larp is to avoid breaking the illusion with meta-level communication. Safety words are an explicit method for declaring limits, but players often prefer using more implicit methods.

While players are absolutely entitled to leave the game and use safety words or meta-level communication when a situation goes too far for their tastes, it is not necessarily easy to do so. The peer pressure from other players and one's own commitment to uphold the illusion can make it very hard indeed to stop everything, break the illusion and say "stop, this is too much for me". In addition to the peer pressure coming from outside, the player's own identity as a good player who does not spoil the experience for others can be extremely hard to overcome, even for one's own safety. Upholding the illusion is something that has been practiced repeatedly by all players over the years, while using safety words is something only a few players have ever done. Assuming that saying "no" is easy in intense situations is stupid. The pressure is often so high that it is easier to go farther

than preferable instead of interrupting the flow.[1]

In recent years the admiration for hardcore gaming has diminished but it is still a prevailing attitude beneath the surface. There is also a strong emphasis on liberal values among larpers. These two together increase the peer pressure and make it more difficult to say out loud that something is not acceptable and that you are not willing to go that far in a simulated larp situation.

One critical prerequisite for consensus is that each player knows his own limits. In the middle of an intensive scene it is impossible to start thinking about your personal limits for the first time and hope to come to a reasonable conclusion and then communicate it to others in time. It is irresponsible towards other players to not know your limits as you are then practically enabling them to go too far, which is something that they do not want either.

In extreme cases of course it is impossible to know beforehand, but players should be aware of their default limits. Only then it is possible to communicate them to others and to maintain them when they are in jeopardy. Many players larp partly because they want to find out their limits or to expand them. It can be a method of self-discovery. However, it would be polite to inform the co-players about not being entirely sure and also wise to be mentally prepared to stop when needed and to go through the mental gymnastics to properly contextualize your experience afterwards.

The communication on these issues is challenging and therefore should be supported by the organizers. While it is the responsibility of each individual player to be clear enough on communicating her own limits to others, it is also the responsibility of the organizers to support this and provide the players an arena before the game where to do it. Structured discussion about suitable limits will ensure that everyone involved is aware of others' (and their own) limits.

At the same time, the use of safety words and other safety mechanisms should be talked over and encouraged. It is highly unlikely that players would start using them too casually and thus any inhibitions regarding their use should be removed if possible. In practice, all supportive actions and the creation of a safe trust filled team spirit must be done before the actual play starts – afterwards it only gets harder.

Amongst Themselves

Larps are typically something played within a magic circle among those participating without any outsiders. Oblivious outsiders cannot by definition be informed volunteers as they are not entirely aware of what is going on. If they are, they are not outsiders anymore but within the magic circle. This is primarily relevant in pervasive games[2] where outsiders are witnessing and partly involuntarily involved in the game. Naturally the larp does not immediately turn unethical when outsiders are drawn in as a part of the fiction. It just raises the risk of somewhat unethical things taking place. It is something that should be thought out.

Most larps aim for powerful immersive experiences. Many of them use momentarily negative feelings to create intensive experiences. Remarkably, most of the time the participants regard these experiences positively in the end. This is a more or less familiar and accepted dynamic to all larpers. However, to ensure that intensive experience is well contextualized and men-

1 Similar dynamics have been discussed recently in Sweden in the context of sexual abuse under the civil movement Prata om det which was initiated by Johanna Koljonen. http://www.prataomdet.se/

2 Ethics of pervasive games has been discussed in Markus Montola, Annika Waern and Jaakko Stenros's book Pervasive Games: Theory and Design.

tally processed, especially if players' everyday boundaries are crossed, the organizers (and perhaps other players) should utilize debriefing methods after the game. In most cases for most players, they are not necessary. But occasionally it is part of the responsibilities of the organizers to properly debrief the experience. Besides, it could be fun for everyone.

Ludography

Neonhämärä (2008-): Niina Niskanen & Simo Järvelä, Helsinki. Eng. "Neon Twilight".

Fat Man Down (2009): Frederik Berg Østergaard. jeepen.org/games/fatmandown

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Claus Raasted (editor)

The Book of KAPO

KAPO *(2011) was a larp project about dehumanisation and life in camps.* KAPO *was an old 1400m2 factory hall, a month of scenography construction, two weekend workshops, 107 participants, around 200 visiting audience members, and 1000+ unique visitors to the Zeeland website.* KAPO *was a self-governed prison camp without guards inside the camp.* KAPO *was 43 hours of play, with new participants coming in and others leaving every 6 hours.* KAPO *was an exhibition that was in place for two weeks with guided tours and video from the larp.* KAPO *is now a documentary film, a book, poems, paintings, diaries, and stories from the participants.*

KAPO *was of course a larp, but it was also a lot more. Besides providing the participants with strong experiences, we hope that* KAPO *will inspire others to try out participant rotation and scenography that the participants can change and rebuild during the larp. Likewise, the interaction between participants and audience is something that may inspire others.*

— Anders Gredal Berner & Juliane Mikkelsen

My Father was a KAPO

By Julie Streit (G09)



(Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas)

I went to KAPO because my father spent some time in a Turkish prison in his youth in the1960's - innocently charged and held without evidence.

This is something he's never really talked about. We only know because he suddenly out of the blue turned out to be able to speak Turkish - and he said that was the explanation, but didn't talk further about it.

I went to KAPO to try to learn something about how my father might have felt.

My father (like many others) was invited to watch KAPO from the spectator stands, where they could observe us, while we as players couldn't see them at all. He came, and had brought a package with him - a package that I got ingame. It had measuring tape (to measure time), a teddy bear (to comfort) and a packet of dried pork snacks (to trade). And a letter from "Mom and Dad".

His reaction to seeing the setting, the interactions, the people and everything, ended with him driving home with my boyfriend and opening a couple of bottles of red wine. And then, for the first time, he told about his experiences in prison - and especially about how he escaped from there. Twice.

But most surprisingly, he told that he had been a KAPO himself - with people "under him".



(Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas)



(Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas)

When we doing the water scene for the trailer, frederik and i were laughing and joking.

But in the end, he had to force my head under water. I couldn't do it myself. And I never want to try that again.

— Edith Fabritius Tvede



(Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas)

K67 032 R53 M18 B63 Z61 J98
X41 L90 V96 C45 S89 U84 N67
Y83 D72 X07 L41 F51 D89 R31
M52 Z16 B78 C99 E72 F33 Q94
064 G12 I90 D33 A76 Y98 P70
N78 A82 G35 A93 A24 G02 H78
L32 C55 G82 A56 S73 V92 E37
K75 Y63 J45 T65 N70 S59 M47
K23 V13 S34 K47 X88 U09 E15
I35 D47 Q51 T20 A15 K39 P47
F80 B67 Y95 Y55 H17 J92 C84 D56
U19 P57 M92 P51 E23 N91 M76 I23
B19 Q26 X52 Z40 I37 D20 E44 J84

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Eirik Fatland

Excavating AmerikA

*In the mid-to-late 1990s the larp scene of Oslo, Norway went through a period of intense creativity. This "golden age" gave us, amongst other things, the Knutepunkt festival, the first inter-Nordic larp (*et Vinter-eventyr*), the age of manifestos (kickstarted by* Dogma 99*), and entirely new ways of looking at the design and functions of larp. Many of the ideas and institutions we take for granted in the inter-Nordic larp movement can be traced back to this time and place.*

Excavating AmerikA *is a snapshot of this movement at its peak, in the year 2000, with the hugely ambitious and influential larp* AmerikA. *I describe this larp as "forgotten". The result of writing such an article, though, and of rescuing Britta Bergersen's excellent photo-documentation from the drawer, is that it has become remembered.*

— Eirik Fatland



The quiet place at the highest point of the mountain of garbage. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

Once upon a time, in the centre of Oslo, there was a place called AmerikA. Spelled just like that – a "k" instead of a "c", and the last A capitalized. If you wrote it by hand, you would circle that last A, graffiti-style. It was neither a continent nor a country, but a smaller place, a single location: A large, magical garbage heap which came alive, pulsating with light and life, attracting the crazy, the destitute, the incomprehensibly visionary. It grew out of the asphalt to exist briefly but intensely, for one weekend of the autumn of 2000, before it disappeared – far more suddenly than it had appeared. It was called, by one visitor, "the greatest thing in Norwegian art since Munch". And it was a larp.

It was, by most measures, the largest larp ever held in Norway. It took almost a hundred organisers and volunteers, organised in multiple networks, committees and subcommittees, to build the whole thing. Production-wise, it was the size of a Swedish 1000-player larp, or a British 3.000-player fest. It drew on the services and sponsorships of dozens of companies, institutions and organisations. It was played by hundreds, closely watched by thousands, observed by tens of thousands. Its economy was modest, relying on material donations and volunteers rather than cash – but had services been paid for the normal way, AmerikA's budget would have been in the millions of Euros.

It is also, perhaps, the most forgotten larp in Norway. Google it, and you will find only some sporadic mentions on larper websites. Most larps suffer this fate – as endeavours, they are similar to sandcastles, reaching their most complete state the moment before they are washed away by the tide. But the large, ambitious, unique larps are usually rewarded with a longer life. Amongst the old-timers, we still talk about the larps of the 1990s. We still invoke the ghosts of *Kybergenesis* or *Knappnålshuvudet* or the Bronze Age larp of 1996. Our favourite larps stay alive as online photo galleries, as Knutebook reports, and as nostalgic conversations. Not so with AmerikA. More film and megapixels were used, more videotapes recorded, to document AmerikA than any other Norwegian larp –



A sample of the AmerikAns. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

but the documentation has been conspicuously hard to find, online and offline.

To this amateur archaeologist of lost larps, the relative obscurity of AmerikA poses two interesting questions. First: If it was forgotten due to mistakes made, might there be something to learn from those mistakes? The "mistake" angle, however, does not ring true. Spectacularly ambitious larps have, in the past, caused a lot of talk even as failures – *Mineva*, a Swedish steampunk larp that was promoted but never held is still considered a canonical larp by some. Hence, AmerikA's disappearance from the larp discourse must have some other explanation, and our second question is the more intriguing one: what has caused this relative obscurity?

I write as only partially an outsider. I was a late arrival to the Weltschmerz network, the loose group that organized AmerikA and its smaller successor Europa. While a principal organiser of Europa, I was a player and only one of many helping hands at AmerikA, though perhaps with more access than most to the main organisers and internal discussions of AmerikA.

Origins

However unique and untraditional, AmerikA was not born in a vacuum. The typical Norwegian larp of the 1990s would be set in the fantasy genre and last for five days of uninterrupted role-playing. The earliest such larps – heavy with swords and sorcery – were plagued by the problem of dead characters. Once a character was dead, the player needed a new character, and as a 5-day larp progressed it would get harder and harder to figure out which player is playing which character. Norwegian larpwrights began limiting the potential for character death and, hence, reduced combat and the kind of magic that kills characters. This dynamic, combined with player preferences, led to a progressively stronger emphasis on the personalities, cultures, society and politics of the characters.

From approximately 1995, some of these cultural simulations – especially in Oslo – began commenting on contemporary so-

ciety or recent history. The larps *Sunrise High* (a high school drama) and *P13* (a hostage-taking thriller) were pastiches of pop culture but also explorations

of US society in the shadows of the Korea and Vietnam wars. *Kybergenesis* dramatized Orwells dystopia "1984" in a larpified study of raw, totalitarian power, while the "Social Femocracy" larps (subtitled "*A Kindergarten teacher's dream*") were respectively interpreted as utopias or dystopias depending on which player you asked. The historical larps *1944* and *1942 – noen å stole på?* (the latter also held in 2000, and a contestor for the title of "largest Norwegian larp") brought attention to the realities of Norway's World War II history, highlighting but also nuancing the official narrative of universal national resistance.

The Weltschmerz Network

It was from players and organisers of some of these larps that the "Weltschmerz Network" crystallized, with start-up meetings and brainstorm sessions held in 1998. The name is one of those seeming self-contradictions that characterize the project – *weltschmerz* (a sense of hopelessness, giving up on the world) was precisely the opposite of what Weltschmerz (the network) was trying to achieve. It was not irony – but the opposite: taking the component German words "world" and "pain" literally. The idea was precisely to expose the "pains of the world", with the aim to change the world rather than withdraw from it.

The network was founded on the belief that larps might be used not just as political commentaries, but also political tools – playground worlds designed to affect change in the real world. There was some justification for this belief: players had reportedly walked off previous politically themed larps, especially Kybergenesis, with radically revised worldviews and political opinions[1]. And larps themselves were media magnets – a hundred costumed players in the woods drew far more press attention than a hundred protesters waving placards in the city.

A second, entangled, current also found its home in the Weltschmerz network: that of seeing larp not just as a form of art, but as something superior to traditional art: more democratic, more inclusive, more powerful in the individual experience and collective transformations it could effect. These two trends were, at the time, easy to unite. Politically themed art, and discussions on the political relevance of art, were once again becoming prominent in the art establishment, a discourse that resonated with the Weltschmerz larpers. Furthermore, various artists and art movements – from interactive and environmental theatre to the net.art and interactive installations of the 90s – had sought to make art more interactive. With some justification, the Weltschmerzers saw larp as the final form of this journey: an art form that was *inherently* interactive and participatory.

An important caveat: The Weltschmerz ideology was never formalized, and there was never complete agreement on what the ideology entailed, but a cluster of ideological statements could be seen in the slogans that surrounded the project: "The age of irony is over", "nothing is true unless it is on television", "Our world, served raw", and "Fuck passive art!". There were certainly Weltschmerz members who did not agree with any of these statements but participated nonetheless. Weltschmerz was a big tent, a blessing but also a curse which, we shall see, came back to haunt AmerikA.

1 The ethical problems of such manipulative larpwrighting were not discussed much at the time. To our defense, the "radically changed worldviews" were still not the worldviews of the organisers.



The Fortress of Washing Machines, home to SevenS, black-clad women who communicated only through song. In the background: headquarters of the national labour unions. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

From Network to Production Team

As with ideology, so with organisation: There were tenets of a belief – in informal networks, flexible organisations – that were never brought to a cohesive whole but rather interpreted in different ways by different members. Among the network's initiators were three old-timers of the Oslo scene – Hanne Grasmo, Attila Steen-Hansen and Erlend Eidsem, who were to serve as AmerikA's director, producer and lead scenographer, transiting from "network members" to hierarchical positions in the process. Still, networked modes of organization could be seen in the way different subdivisions of the hierarchy were given unusually extensive autonomy to make major decisions on their own domain, whether it was dramaturgy or the physical shape of the garbage heap, and further recruit organizers and volunteers through their own personal networks.

While most of the other Weltschmerzers were larpers, several had only a tangential connection to larp and a stronger connection to either "art", "politics", or both. !e network met partially on an e-mail list, partially at brainstorm sessions where ideas for future projects were freely discussed.

From those early brainstorm sessions came the concept of a series of "continent larps", each one focusing on "world problems" with a continent as metaphor, and the notion of placing a garbage heap in the centre of Oslo. When the time came to put ideas into action, they were combined and the "slum town" became AmerikA.

Concept

"Garbage 1:
Waste. Trash. Rats. Blood. Stains. Rags. Leftovers. Dust.
Rust. Stench. Fumes. Puke. Broken. Damaged.
Buried. Hidden. Forgotten.

Garbage 2:
Shreddable commerciality."
- from the AmerikA website[1]

The narrative, as it was marketed beforehand, was this: A winning lottery ticket has been inadvertently thrown away. Media has tracked its path through the waste handling system, to the garbage pile AmerikA, home to tons of rubbish and a few dozen homeless. Suddenly thrust into the limelight, AmerikA is sought out by treasure-hunters of all kinds, scavenging for the lottery ticket.

At the larp, some were to play the resident "homeless" – who had built their homes on the garbage heap – others to play secondary fulltime characters, who were frequent visitors to the heap, and a final group were to play different kinds of invaders – treasure-hunters, tourists doing "slumming", their guides and facilitators, as well as others. The genre was announced as "magical realism" – and while it was gritty, dirty and impoverished there was also magic aplenty, and a certain degree of abstraction. For example, the organisers declined to specify which country AmerikA was located in, never mind whether it was diegetically placed in the centre of Oslo.

AmerikA and America

The name was not only a reference to the United States, although distorted American flags and images of Lady Liberty featured in some of the promotional material. It was rather a reference to the Americas; north, south and centre; and to some aspects of what they represent to Europeans.

AmerikA the larp focused on liberty (seen in the main cast of characters), exploitative capitalism (seen in the primary antagonist), constructive capitalism and the American dream (hinted at in the in-game economy), and more than anything on consumerism and the rich-poor gap, manifested in the very public display of the garbage that is the hidden excrement of consumerism.

Still, these aspects of "America" were sources of inspiration, rather than a "message". There was never one Message to AmerikA, never a single answer to the question "So what was AmerikA about?" There were plenty, overlapping and sometimes contradictory statements made either explicitly by organisers or implicitly by their work. It visualized poverty, and the rich-poor divide, but it was not a hardcore larp where players would feel, on their body, the life of the dwellers in Earths worst slums. AmerikA can easily be accused of romanticizing poverty, as many of its central characters were voluntary outcasts, dignified in their rags, well fed – presumably unlike the involuntary poor. But their dignity, romance, and semi-voluntary estrangement from respectable society would not be apparent to the casual observer. To the citizens of Oslo, the citizens of AmerikA were presented as pitiful, outcasts, the monsters of underclass given centre stage. Was it then a moral tale, about the inherent humanity of the impoverished, the romance of life to be discovered under a dirty surface? Was the tale meant for the role-players, or those who watched them?

The lottery ticket narrative, likewise, could be seen as a story about the search for happiness, symbolized by gambling wealth. But was it also a critique of this narrative – an emphasis on the futility of the quest for material riches? Who were the happier: the desperate treasure-hunters who did not find the ticket, the hobos who did not even search for it, or the yuppies who were so bored with their own wealth they needed to enter the slum for a taste of excitement? And what shall we make of the choice of Youngstorget as the location for the game? Known to Norwegians as "maktens torg", the marketplace of power, Youngstorget is surrounded by the offices of political par-

1 The original pre-game version of the website is located at http://weltschmerz.laiv.org/AmerikA/index2.htm

ties and the main labour unions. Was it to spite them or to identify with them that tons of garbage were placed in their midst and turned into a larp?

These questions cannot be resolved, for the simple reason that the answer will depend on whom of the organisers you ask, and the final form of the larp combined ideas from all of them. And, as we shall see, the intentions of the organisers did not necessarily match what actually occurred at AmerikA. Once the larp was left in the hands of its players, it took on a life of its own.



"Herr P", the oldest of the bergboer and the first to settle on the garbage pile. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

The Characters

The number of "players" at AmerikA is hard to count. Some thirty to fifty players had prepared for months, including three full weekends of drama exercises (for one weekend of larp) to play the core community of the garbage heap. More full-time characters (nobody knows how many) were added as the larp came closer. During the larp came the one-shot characters, their players recruited from the street, who walked in for a few hours of play. Guided tours brought scores of tourists being shown around the garbage pile for half-hour trips. And finally, there were the spectators: people who stood outside AmerikA, staring in, observing, some glued to the spot for the entire weekend.



The woman who was a cat. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

From this onion-like structure of participation, we find an onionlike structure of characters: at the heart were the *bergboer*[1], the

1 The Norwegian word "bergboere" literally translates as "mountain-livers", and can apply to someone who lives on top of or inside a mountain. Additionally, the word has folkloric connotations, as trolls were said to inhabit the inside of mountains. "Bergboer" is the singu-



A character consorting with a sanitation worker (organiser). (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

citizens of the garbage heap. They had little in common except for being outcasts, some voluntarily so. An old prostitute, a bottle-cap general, a mad preacher, a woman who was a cat, a non-abusive paedophile: this is just a sample of the characters that lived on AmerikA, calling it their "home".

Outside these, but still full time characters: the invaders and ancillaries – the Real Life Company (RLC), a corporation specializing in "slumming" and extreme tourism, the gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats, the seven women who lived in a fortress of washing machines and com municated only through song, as well as groups who pretended to belong to one of the former categories but had sinister agendas of their own.

Then there were the part-timers – treasure hunters, expelled kids in search of a home, the General's ex-wife, a DJ working for the Real Life Company – characters that would enter for a few hours with some minor connection to the society of AmerikA.

Even less committed: the tourists, brought into AmerikA for even briefer periods on slumming tours, trash-techno parties, waving cameras and expensive electronics, tourists both in-game and off.

And finally, there were the spectators. AmerikA was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of AmerikA, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. No-one thought to interview the spectators, or figure out what their experience was like, but the following anecdote is telling: late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: "I'm so exhausted... I've stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I'll be back first thing in the morning!"

My own lens to AmerikA was through playing the character of Aronsen, the junk dealer. Our shop, mine and my assistants', was an old bus, with half on the inside and half on the outside of the wall that surrounded AmerikA. We would buy items of interest from the citizens of AmerikA on the inside, and resell them to shoppers on the outside. Each customer was told not just the price of the artefacts, but also their history – "This lighter here may seem old and insignificant, but in fact, it was once used by a young man to light the cigarette of a young woman whom he had just met but would subsequently marry. And this old typewriter..." All of Aronsens stories were true, and when he bought artefacts their price were determined by the value of the stories that they held.

lar, "bergboere" the indefinite plural and "bergboerene" the definite plural. In this article, I have used "bergboer" as the English plural form.



A nighttime display of photographic art. The cross above was erected by AmerikA's resident mad preacher. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

Gritty Magic

Aronsens supernatural ability to sense the history of objects was an example of AmerikAs "magical realism": there were no wizards or vampires or spells going "flash!" and "bang!". No rules were needed to simulate this magic – it was embedded in the characters, enacted in dramatic expression and improvisation. Its magic was manifest in little things, oddities of nature, character back-stories, trivial yet symbolic.

Perhaps the closest cultural reference to AmerikA can be found in the movies of Emir Kusturica, and especially *Age of the Gypsies* – where the protagonist's mystical talent at telekinesis, and visitations from the ghost of his dead mother, do absolutely nothing to save him from a life of crime, tragedy and poverty yet illuminate his story, lend to it some meaning and sense of wonder. And the lives of the AmerikAns were tragic, poor, sometimes criminal – but also strangely numinous with meaning.

Character Development

For the players at the heart of the onion, a great deal of time was spent by the larpwrights on coming up with and refining character ideas. These ideas were sometimes written, sometimes communicated verbally, sometimes developed through discussions between player and larpwright. Further development happened at the drama workshops, where each character was associated with an animal and the players were led – through drama exercises – to "evolve" the character from animal to human, borrowing personality and body language from the animal spirit.

Of the *bergboer*, each character was individual, personal, and only the players



A moment of silent meditation inside the temple of discarded televisions. The text on the refrigerator refers to God and to Norway's most popular brand of frozen pizza. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

have a complete picture of their characters. The individuality and subjectivity of the characters make them hard to document, unlike the achievements of contemporary Swedish and Finnish arthaus larp with their elaborate written texts. But the sheer joy of exploration that could be obtained from meeting, interacting with, and understanding

AmerikAs gallery of characters points to the larp as a truly extraordinary accomplishment of both role-playing and larp authorship.

However, as we progress further out from the centre of the onion, characters become increasingly brief and generic. The gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats were unique and well-defined as groups, but individual characters were left for players to refine from a collective template. The Real Life Company was defined by function rather than personality – "Cook", "Guide", "Manager". Work did go into supporting players in their individual character development, but it was nowhere near as refined as that spent on the *bergboer*. Some groups, such as "the witches" seemed like they were introduced only to increase the number of players: a larp cliché if ever there was one, and one that felt quite alien to AmerikA. At the extreme end, each tourist had only the character of "tourist", in-game and off, probably the simplest playable generic character ever invented.

This, I should add, was neither coincidence nor necessarily poor craft: there was a conscious decision by the organisers to focus their creative effort on the central characters at the expense of the others, in the belief that excellent role-playing by the *bergboer* would carry the larp for other players as well as spectators. While this hypothesis may have been correct, it did not correspond well with larpers' expectations of equal treatment and post-larp feedback included complaints of neglect or poor dramaturgy from non-bergboer players.

Dramaturgy

With any larp, we can talk of two dramaturgies – the one intended by the larpwrights beforehand, the *fabula*, and the actual observable interaction of players, the *larp situation*. At AmerikA, these diverged to an unusual degree.

Here is how I think the larp was intended to be played: a host of treasure hunters would descend on AmerikA, encounter and interact with its central characters, who might support or oppose the treasure-hunt

but in any event provide some fine role-playing. Since several false lottery tickets were planted, and at least one of the groups pretending to be the Lottery Commission had other, more sinister, motives, the plot would twist and turn until eventually the ticket would be found and the larp would be over. In the mean time colour would be provided by a number of minor plots, such as "The Rats" attempting to establish themselves on "Crazy Dogs" territory, the *bergboer* would be their usual entertaining selves, and the Real Life Company with their guests would watch from the sidelines.

In the larp as it was actually played, the lottery ticket was only one of several lesser stories, not particularly important to other characters than the treasure hunters. The central conflict of the larp situation came to be between the "citizens" – gangs and *bergboer* – and the Real Life Company (RLC). The attitude of the citizens towards the RLC was not clearly defined before the larp, but players naturally interpreted it as hostile. As the Real Life Company held slumming tours and sat perched on the roof of the café, laughing at the poor sods down on the ground, hostility increased.

The Incident by the Television Temple

The turning point came on Friday evening, when a (real) camera crew with a (real) TV



AmerikAns playing war-drums on a discarded pipe. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

star[1] were guided around AmerikA by the RLC as part of a (role-played) initiation rite for the spoilt (real/role-played) TV star. The TV team's arrogant behaviour (not role-played, but interpreted as if it were) provoked the citizens in several different ways, culminating in a near-violent situation when the TV team tried to enter the Temple of Discarded Televisions, a holy place to many of the *bergboer*, and were surrounded by a mob of angry, threatening natives. The threatening behaviour of that mob is some of the most realistic-looking role-play I have seen at larp – the crowd were intimidating both in-game and off, furious both as characters and players. The border that separates role-play from authentic behaviour was particularly porous in this situation, as the camera team undoubtedly saw themselves as being outside of the game. Eventually, the team and its star, chose to leave rather than fight, and in the later report that aired on TV the scene by the temple is the final one.

The Siege of the Real Life Café

The "TV team incident" was followed by several more incidents and constant tension. The climactic moment came on Saturday, when the RLC tried – unsuccessfully – to resolve tensions by holding a speech directed towards the *bergboer* from the platform of their cafè. Mid-speech, the cafè was stormed by 20+ citizens, and the RLC spent the rest of the larp on their platform in a state of siege, reduced to a symbol of the Enemy: those who had cast us out, or those from whom we sought isolation.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the presence of a Real Life Company intruding on the of AmerikA's outcast society would lead to conflict. But the organisers had not intended this. The RLCs dramaturgical function was to provide a way for part-time characters to enter

1 The "star" in question was comedienne Anne-Kat Hærland, at the time the hostess of the show "Nytt på Nytt" on NRK, the Norwegian public broadcaster.



A romantic dinner, AmerikA-style. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

the larp – its symbolic function was to embody the contrast between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, garbage producers and garbage collectors.That this contrast ended up as actual conflict is, at least in part, due to one of those small misunderstandings that can have big consequences at a larp.

How Real is an Unreal Contract?

AmerikA had an owner – the character of the "Trash Baron". She owned the ground upon which AmerikA stood, ran the garbage dumping business, and gave the *bergboer* permission to stay there in return for a small rent and other services. The Baron was the highest-status character in the game, and we were instructed that when the Baron said "jump!", we jumped. The organisers had intended for the RLC to be present under the Trash Barons protection, and communicated this by holding a minilarp where RLC and the Baron agreed on the terms of protection. At that mini-larp, agreement was reached, and the RLC promised to send a formal contract for the Baron to sign. During the time that passed between the mini-larp and AmerikA, no contract was produced. The RLC players saw this as an "off-game" matter – that the contract had been sent, read and signed without the need to role-play. The Baron's court interpreted it is an in-game matter – that no such contract existed. Subsequently, when push came to shove at the larp, the RLC found itself without the Baron's protection.

This begs the question: would things have happened differently, if this misunderstanding had not occurred? I doubt it. The "TV Team Incident" was situated on the border between in-game and off, characters and their players. The camera crew in all likelihood thought of themselves as off-game observers, and the behaviour interpreted as arrogant and provocative by the characters was merely the behaviour of professionals doing their job documenting people they thought of as actors.

When the players chose to interpret the camera crew as in-game, and express their



A player/character resting outside of the limelight. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

hostility towards them through fairly real-looking physical role-play, a boundary was crossed. The players did not disobey any formal rules of the larp, but they asserted their right to decide what was diegetic – a power traditionally held by the larpwright or gamesmaster. Similarly, the characters did not disobey the Baron's orders, as no such orders were given, but they claimed AmerikA as their territory in unambiguous terms. This was AmerikA's Rubicon moment – from that point, there was no turning back. I suspect that if the trash baron had subsequently proclaimed the RLC to be under her protection, she would not have stopped the rebellion but would instead have become a target of it.

Performing in the Public Space

AmerikA's biggest claim to innovation was its situation in public space, asking its participants to simultaneously be role-players and actors, to play for the sake of their own experience and for the observers. What were the consequences of this experiment? My own immediate experience was that it was extremely demanding. The moment I walked out from the bus wreck that was my in-character home, I felt the burden of all those eyes observing, felt that every move I made mattered (and needed to be well-executed), saw myself from the outside. It was not stage fright, but rather the exhaustion that comes from performing a difficult and demanding task combined with the immersionbreaker of constantly thinking about your role-play from the outside.

Even harder than role-playing against other larpers in public view was role-playing against customers in Aronsen's Second Hand Antiques – we found it both tiresome, and ultimately impossible, to role-play our borderline lunatic characters against audiences who did not even pretend that they believed in our play. A role-played outburst of anger, for example, would be met with polite laughter from the "customer", who saw all of this as entertaining, and did not even acknowledge that she had just been insulted by an angry shopkeeper. The customer's behaviour constantly negated our



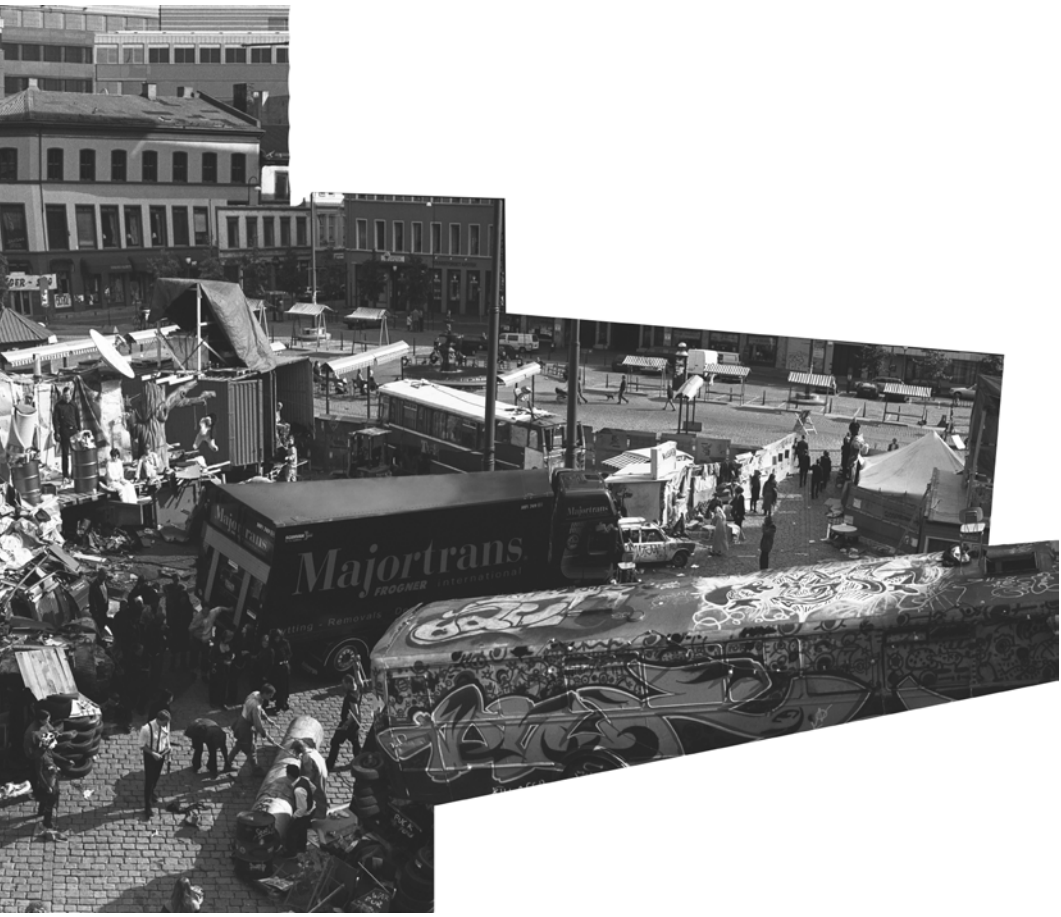
AmerikA as it appeared from the terrace overlooking Youngstorget. (Photo: Britta Kristina Bergersen)

own. Eventually we gave up, and closed the shop to the outside.

The Performers, the Role-Players and Those In-Between

Was my experience shared by all? Certainly not. Most players felt the pressure of performance, and many commented that they took frequent offgame breaks, a usual no-no at Norwegian larps, as a way to handle that pressure. But while some, otherwise capable, players withdrew into the shadows others – equally capable – received a boost from the limelight, and excelled when role-playing in the open spaces. A third group – perhaps the majority – felt the public role-play to be tiresome, yet nonetheless meaningful, and carefully alternated between public play, private play and off-game breaks.

This did not amount to an ideal larp experience, rather to several smaller episodes of meaningful play interspersed by off-game breaks. For me, the high points were individual meetings with other *bergboer* characters in the privacy of their shacks and tents. For a more extravert friend who played Peder P, Aronsen's stuttering wreck of an assistant, the high point was a romantic dinner, held in public view in the central space of AmerikA on a candle-lit table made of trash, seated on old toilets, where his shy, inept character managed to con-



duct a shy, inept and highly endearing date with a woman he referred to as “an angel”. It was a beautiful private moment, viewed by thousands.

AmerikA confirmed, on one hand, that live role-playing can be done in front of an audience and remain meaningful to both role-players and viewers. But conversely, our experiences demonstrated that the skills and motivations required to enjoy and succeed at such performative play are not the same as those required to enjoy and succeed at a regular larp. In the years after AmerikA, I have several times seen experienced theatre actors entering their first larp – and withdrawing, due to exhaustion, after a few hours of highly intense role-playing. Their challenge seems to be the same as ours, inverted. If any conclusion can be drawn from this, it is that “role-playing” and “acting” are two separate modes of behaviour and not subclasses of each other.

What leads some players to adopt a performative style of role-play, while others do not? Can these skills be learned? Can larps be designed so as to be fully enjoyable both as performances to be watched and role-play to be participated in, or must there always be a trade-off? Alas – AmerikA does not give us enough information to provide any clear answers, except that the field remains problematic.

Hindsight is 360°

A surreal slum city in the centre of Oslo: surely this is media fodder? Yes, and no. Press coverage was disappointing, to say the least. Few took the event seriously, the journalists dispatched were mostly hacks, and the most significant coverage allotted to the larp came from the aforementioned "Nytt på nytt", a TV programme devoted to low-brow satire. !e carefully planned media strategy – based on trading exclusivity for quality coverage – fell apart before the larp started, when some journalists managed to get hold of three volunteer builders, grabbed some quick quotes and photos, and thereby "scooped" the event – obliterating interest from the rest of the media. In the end, AmerikA left a far smaller imprint on the public record than it had on the city of Oslo.

But what of the players? One explanation for AmerikAs relative obscurity might have been that it wasn't particularly enjoyable as a role-playing experience. Player reports vary, as they always do, and some reported very intense experiences. Still – the reviews, the few of them that made it into written form, and the many I have heard orally, were highly mixed. While organisers were thanked for their sacrifices, the words "Best", "Larp", "Ever" – that are routinely spoken after even mediocre larps – are conspicuously absent from AmerikA reviews. While the players of the *bergboer* were generally satisfied, though not always enthusiastically so, several of the outer rings of the onion were dissatisfied.

The conflict against the Real Life Company was important to the *bergboer*, but damaged the larp of the RLC players, who spent most of their time as besieged observers on the café roof, unable to realize any of the activities they had planned pre-larp. After the larp had started, players who had received "tacked-on characters" realized they were neither important nor particularly welcome – and felt, perhaps, unfairly treated. From several different angles, there were complaints that the "plots" left their characters with too little or too much to do. Many of AmerikA's characters were deep, complex and well-defined, but the dramaturgy and social structures rehearsed old larp clichés, built over simple conflicts ("Group A and Group B are eternal enemies") and puzzle plots ("someone has found the lottery ticket/Ring of Power/magic trinket – but who? Not everyone is who they pretend to be"). !ese "plots" ended up focusing on a few characters and institutions – which were actively sought out by others, leading to a severe imbalance in activity. In terms of aesthetics it was, to quote one artist who walked off the street and into AmerikA to join the larp movement, the "most important thing to happen in Norwegian art since Munch". But as a larp, as role-played experience, it wasn't particularly memorable.

The political project of AmerikA was also lampooned by one sanctimonious reviewer on the laiv.org webforum:

> "How many of us left for Prague? How many stayed to clean away the trash? How many used plastic cutlery during the larp? How many are still drinking Coca Cola? How many have seen the garbage they themselves are made of?
>
> Those numbers should tell us how good this was. And from what I have seen this far, we haven't come a _single_ step further".

This critique, of co-players as much as organisers – is instructive, because it illustrates how little consensus there was in the feedback. Players criticized AmerikA *and each other* from wildly different angles, complaining about unfulfilled expectations: it was not a good enough larp, it was not a good enough performance. It did not keep its promise of innovative character-work, or it was too untraditional and difficult to play. It didn't have enough "plots" or it shouldn't have had "plots". It was too political, it was not political enough. Every participant, every organiser, had their own unique dream of AmerikA. The communications, pre-larp, were

well-written but ambiguous, making it easy for players to project wildly different expectations onto the larp. In the end, the fulfilment of any one dream would have to come at the expense of the others.

"How did it come to this?"

The radical seed idea, that of a politically and artistically transformative mega-larp held in the centre of Oslo, was impossible to achieve with the limited resources available to the Weltschmerz founders. As the project progressed, and ever-greater hurdles were encountered, the initiators took to selling off chunks of the vision, piecemeal, in return for a chance to realize it.

When human resources were insufficient, more and more people were brought on board and given the authority to make any decision in their domain. AmerikA's dysfunctional dramaturgy was presumably caused by the fact that the character writers did not agree on what constituted a "good character" and a "good plot". Any one of their ideal dramaturgies might have worked, but the final mish-mash of dramaturgies and individual styles did not.

The greatest sacrifices were those made to secure funding for the larp. To prospective business sponsors, AmerikA was sold as a grand spectacle, while political groups were assured of its meaning as a protest against consumerism and inequality while the artists who worked as scenographers were assured of its artistic purity. To the wider Oslo larp scene,

AmerikA was sold simply as a huge promotion of live role-playing itself. In this way, volunteers and paying players were recruited, and both were needed to get the accounts to balance, but the artistic and political edge of the project was dulled. In order to accommodate the wider larp scene which supported AmerikA, any mention of art and politics was eviscerated from the media strategy. But as one organiser confessed to me a few weeks before the larp: "We are whoring ourselves off to anyone who can offer the slightest bit of help".

Things might have been different had AmerikA obtained a single large grant or single large sponsor early on. At the very least, it would have freed core organisers from the chores of fundraising and left them free to focus on actually making the larp. But the major funders of Norwegian art and culture declined the applications sent by AmerikA, and the final budget had to be pieced together from an overwhelming number of other sources.

Judging the Garbage Pile

From the previous chapters, it is tempting to conclude that AmerikA was a failure, or at least a mediocrity. However: we do not judge a theatre play by how much the actors enjoy it. Is it then right to judge a public spectacle such as AmerikA by discussing the quality of "characters" and "plots", by the metric of "player experience"?

I have neglected one group in my summary of reviews above: the observers. What was their outcome of the larp? Since we do not know their names or how to contact them, we cannot know. But what drove them to stay perched on the balcony a whole weekend, through rain and cold and darkness, to watch us role-play? Surely they were not watching a failure.

AmerikA tried to succeed as a larp, as a political demonstration, and as an art project, and I think it succeeded admirably on at least two of those accounts. As a larp, it was certainly imperfect, but innovative larps are never perfect. The project's story, of organisers struggling with the impossibility of their ambitions, is similar to those of *Kybergenesis*, *Trenne Byar*, *Futuredrome* and *Dragonbane*. !e first two are generally regarded as important milestones in Norwegian arthaus larp and Swedish fantasy respectively. Only timing and happenstance separates them from the latter two, which have a more mixed legacy.

AmerikA might have been a flawed role-playing experience. But it was, as many players commented, a great experience – living, for three days, in the pul-

sating, magical garbage-world, Art and Discovery and the Sense of Wonder behind every corner, fascinating stories being enacted by every person you meet. Had all pretensions at role-play been dropped, had it been announced as a "Burning Man"-style festival in the centre of Oslo, would it have been better thought of? Probably, but "AmerikA the trash art festival" could never have been held without the resources of the larp scene – and without the role-playing, I think it would have been a poorer event.

I think it is safe to claim that it succeeded as art, as an aesthetic spectacle of multiple meanings to be observed and perhaps interacted with, and that this success was made possible only by it also being a larp with political ambitions.

When I summarize the player reviews, it should also be kept in mind that most of the players never posted a review, and most of the reviews posted were strangely fragmented, oscillating between praise and criticism, discussing random details but not the whole. Offline conversations have left me with the same impression: that something central is missing in our evaluation of AmerikA. We were asking whether AmerikA was a good or bad larp, and clearly it was both, but the question we really wanted to discuss was: "what did it all mean"?

Legacy and Prophecy

With the benefit of eight years of hindsight, I can try to answer that question, and at the same time assess whether AmerikA was successful as a political project.

"How many of us left for Prague?" asked the sanctimonious reviewer above, and he was referring to the anti-IMF and World Bank protests that would occur a week after AmerikA. "ese were the European extension of an anti-globalization movement that had reached the West in the autumn of 1999, as AmerikA was on the drawing board, when a loose coalition of labour unions, anarchists and environmentalists succeeded in shutting down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

While not many AmerikAns left for Prague, many joined the movement in the autumn of 2000 and spring of 2001, becoming founding members and core activists of the Norwegian branches of Attac, the Independent Media Centre and Adbusters. In the summer of 2001, during the protests against the EU ministerial meeting, I walked with some fellow larpers through the streets of Gothenburg, every shop closed, police helicopters hovering overhead, and we reflected on how very larp-like this all was, how like AmerikA.

There was a spirit of angry optimism underlying those outbursts of aggressive protest. The conflicts of the anti-globalization movement were not new – what was new was the sense that it was finally time to do something about them. !e age of global cold wars and local despotism was over, and it was time to direct our attention to matters higher up on the moral scale. The punks in Seattle, the Brazilian land squatters, the Korean farmers, were fighting the same angrily optimistic battle as the citizens of AmerikA throwing out the Real Life Company. It was a fight not over money and resources and ideology, but rather for a way of life, for the right to be poor and self-governed, however imperfectly, rather than middle class and enslaved.

In this sense, AmerikA was both prophetic and a self-fulfilling prophecy – pre-empting the global justice movement that would not fully arrive in Norway until some months later, partially with the help of radicalized larpers.

Were we influenced by AmerikA in our subsequent activism? Perhaps. If AmerikA's goal had been to manipulate its players into adopting such political persuasions, it would have succeeded admirably. But, as discussed initially, the larp's vision and content were so ambiguous that any claim of intentional manipulation falls apart. Rather: AmerikA became a political discussion by other means, a place where

the aesthetic, philosophical and activist threads of the new politics were brought together, and digested by players through their own contributions and conclusions. AmerikA was where we met, and where these ideas met, and where they passed from abstractions into the world of embodied experience.

In another sense, too, AmerikA would be both prophetic and selffulfilling prophecy: loudly and aggressively proclaiming the arrival of larp as a superior, participatory, form of art. When Swedish larpwright-turned pervasive game producer Martin Ericsson shouted "Fuck passive entertainment!" from the stage of the 2008 Emmy Awards, he was paraphrasing a slogan that had first appeared on AmerikA posters eight years earlier.

From Angry Optimism to Defeated Pessimism

The "global justice", or anti-globalization, movement is still around. But it lost its momentum, optimism and spirit of inevitability when two planes crashed in New York in September 2001 and the global political climate changed. The vision of America which was mirrored in the Real Life Company – a well-meaning technocracy, oppressive only in its belief that consumerism and suburban villas were the birthright and duty of all mankind – has been replaced by the image of a wounded giant, full of vengeance as it falls. Recent years have shown the Europe of civil wars, ethnic cleansing, and dehumanizing bureaucracy – which was subsequently mirrored in the larp Europa – to be far more plausible than the angry optimism of AmerikA.

I think this is the reason we do not talk about AmerikA. Every day, the news reminds us of Europa *(asylum seekers drowning in the Gibraltar, neo-nazis throwing Molotov cocktails at houses of prayer)*, or of 1942 *(tanks rolling into Tskhinvali, bomber planes hovering ominously over Baghdad)*, or of a dozen other dark and brutal and war-like larps that have been played in the years before and after AmerikA.

But as for AmerikA, the brief and imperfect and aggressive glimpse it provided of an autonomous Utopia, a place where dignity could walk in rags, and the Real Life Company could be defeated; that vision was so fragile, so fleeting, that we cannot think back on it without feeling embarrassingly naïve.

And ultimately, I propose, that is why AmerikA deserves to be remembered: We have had enough of tragedies and dystopias, in larp as in real life. Fuck passive art! It's time to resurrect the magically real.

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Bjarke Pedersen & Lars Munck

Walking the White Road

A Trip into the Hobo Dream

Inspired by a Fëa Livia *article about two girls who in-character gate-crashed a real hillbilly party,* The White Road *was one of several contemporary pervasive experiments interacting with the real world. What made it special was the emphasis on weaving a positive story as equals with non-players we met. The result was a poetic co-created experience that left a profound impact on its players.*

None of us could have predicted what the game would do to us. The road showed us a boundless freedom we had never met before, in or outside of larping. Occasionally I still get an urge from my co-players to return to the road. Living out this contagiously blissful existence, though, even for a short while, could have dire consequences given its heavy flirtation with alcoholism and societal seclusion.

Larp is dangerous. It can change your life, as The White Road *did with mine. The game created a thirst for a free and humble life, impossible to quench. Years after, when I found myself walking a dusty Spanish road on the Camino Pilgrimage, I realised I was picking up where* The White Road *left off. Pilgrims and hobos are mythical wanderers on the thin edge of society and the road gives you a wild chance to make an honest judgement of what matters.*

— Lars Munck



The Open Road. (Photo: the Road Knights)

On a warm autumn morning, six hobos began the most important journey of their life: To bury their best friend and greatest love. What needed to be done was clear to them, and as the journey took them closer to their goal, they could see their own salvation peak at the horizon. This article describes the preparations and execution of a larp co-created by all players and the experiences and techniques used to make a truly life changing game.

In *The White Road* the participants played road knights who walked approximately 40 kilometers on an open road to reach the sea. It was played over three days, from September 8 to September 10 in 2006, on the roads between Copenhagen and Frederiksund. The game had six players – three of them men, three of them women.

The *White Road* is inspired by the Danish "road knight" hobo culture[1]. The road knights follow a strict code of rules: They do not do drugs, steal or beg for money. They are often seen equipped with baby carriages, alcohol and Danish flags. They wear ragged makeshift uniforms consisting of old discarded uniform jackets, a cap or hat, and a lot of pins and medals. When they have been through the initiation process, which lasts a year, they are christened by their peers.[2]

The players of *The White Road* portrayed a group of devastated individuals, total strangers to each other, each of whom have discovered a burning spark of hope through a person they met on their journeys. This person was very important to the characters, but he is now deceased and all that remains are his ashes. This person is still, even after his death, the most powerful symbol of hope and enlightenment the characters have ever experienced in their life. He was a guide, a father figure, a lover and a friend, and he had a different,

1 "Landevejsridder" in Danish.

2 For more information, see www.landevejsridder.dk and www.vagabondavisen.dk (in Danish).



The Knights of The White Road pose for the camera. (Photo: the Road Knights)

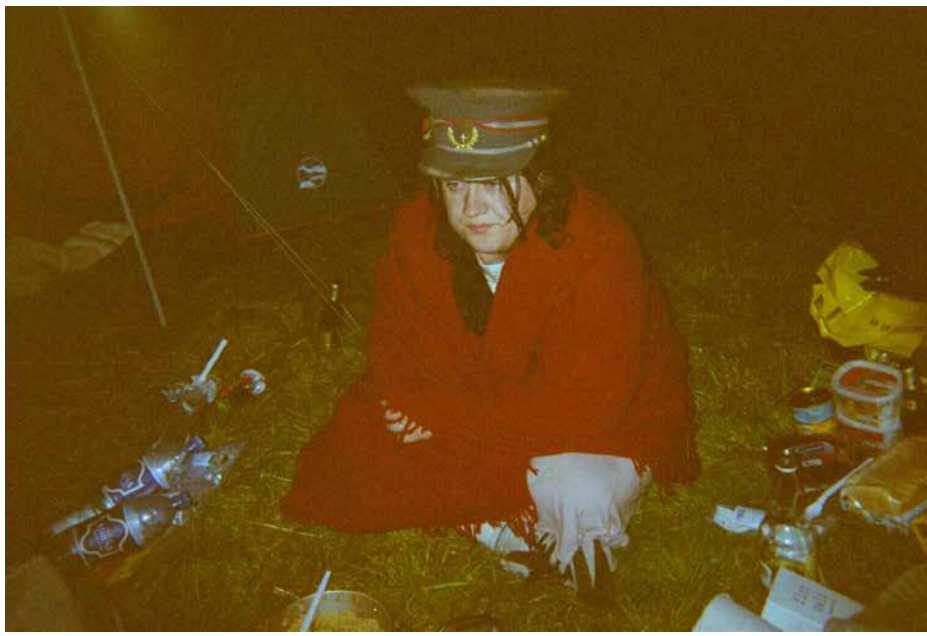
but always a special relationship with each character. The remains of the person lie inside an old milk bucket, to be scattered at sea at the end of the journey. The focus of the larp was to explore the carefree world of the road knights, to play a character who had hit rock bottom and only recently begun the process of rebuilding his existence.

The title of the game was at first chosen at random. Later in the process, it transformed into an image of an inverted world where the sky is dark and the road looks like it is made of chalk, so bright that it hurts the eyes. The players took this image and made it a focal point throughout the game; striving to see the road as sacred ground and treat it with respect.

The original idea was to make a road larp, a larp adaptation of the road movie. During their journey the characters hunt for freedom and the dream of a better life, wondering what lies beyond the next hill. The focus of the larp was not in the endless possibilities the characters could choose from, as seen in so many larps. Instead, the purpose of the trip was made very clear from the beginning: The players knew the route to the sea and had agreed to be true to this narrative. Thus, the motivations of the characters were already fixed. What the players were left to explore where all the little stories and emotions on the road towards this common goal. Simply put, *The White Road* was about walking from point A to point B and seeing what happens in between.

The Process

This larp was somewhat different in structure, process and execution than most other larps because of two main factors. Firstly, because it had a heavy focus on each player's ability to create the larp proactively and in cooperation with the other players, and not rely on an organiser's passive and dictated views of how the larp should be understood or run. Secondly, because it was made under the vow of the Dogma '99 manifesto (Fatland & Wingård, 2003). The manifesto sets strict rules on what is allowed in the creation of the game.



Knight at night. (Photo: Road Knights)

The Dogma ’99 manifesto concerns itself with eliminating all excess in a larp in order to find the true essence of larping. The manifesto defines larp as *“a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world”*. Since this is all you need to larp, you can cut away all of the excess you normally tend to believe you need in order to larp. For example, in Dogma ’99 all objects are what they are, so a boffer sword would be nothing more than a boffer sword in the larp, not a dangerous steel blade. Game mechanics as a whole are forbidden; what is possible in real life is possible in the larp. This eliminates many possibilities from an organiser’s point of view, but at the same time it forces you to focus on the single most important part of larping: the relationships between characters. At *The White Road* we broke one rule. We did not use real human remains in the urn. This was for legal reasons. The authors of the Dogma ’99 manifesto were contacted, and we were permitted to still call it a Dogma larp in spite of this small violation of the vow.

Due to these design constraints, *The White Road* was organised collectively.[1] All players were organisers and no single person had the right to overrule another’s idea of a character or their understanding of the world around him. The larp was created in discussions with all players present. No characters or other texts were written about the larp. Only practical issues were written down. This made the idea of the larp, characters, and relations between the characters set in the mind of the players in a more natural way. It also prevented players from making mistakes about the game; what you, as a player, remembered was also what your character would remem-

1 Martine Svanevik (2005) has described how to cohesively create larps collectively. The paper was not known to the organizers until after the larp, but the ideas presented in it reflect almost exactly our process with The White Road. It describes the process effectively and it’s a great practical guide for organizers and players alike. We recommend it highly.

ber. Just as relationships in real life are extremely difficult to put on paper, so were the relationships in our game.

As a part of the character development process, we were inspired by the real road knights' baptism. Prospect road knights are to submit to strict rules and live a full year outdoors without receiving any social welfare. If they are found worthy, they are then baptised at the yearly summit and given a new name that symbolises a personal event or trait. So in *The White Road*, the player did not have any say concerning the name of their own character. The other players found a name that characterised the individual and it made a great base for the further development of the character.

The players met three times before the game, using 15 to 20 hours in total to create the larp. The time was intentionally limited, in order to avoid overdoing the game. Normally, when you organise a larp you tend to go into meticulous detail about various aspects of the larp. This consumes immense amounts of time and often has little or no impact on the game. One of the main goals when we created *The White Road* was to make a larp that did not exhaust the organisers so all the creative energy was gone when the larp begun. By playing in the real world all the problems, such as finding a location or building a setting were eliminated. We only needed to concern ourselves with character relations and a very short verbal description of the characters' background, costumes and baby carriages, which is an iconic symbol of the road knights.

Making the Real Tangible

Most larps are held in private spaces with no interaction between players and non-players. Since *The White Road* would be held on the roads of Denmark, we had to take into account that there would be relevant communication between players and non-players. This had the potential of leading players into problems. We had to show responsibility and common sense when interacting with people who had not volunteered to participate in *The White Road*. On the other hand, we did not want this consideration to become a hindrance to playing for the participants.

We decided to eliminate this problem by not considering the game world as a created reality placed in a fraction of the real world, but instead decided to view the entire ordinary world as the game world. Merging the game world and the ordinary world gives endless possibilities to the players, since the merged world becomes vast and the players can go anywhere. However, since a route had already been agreed on, this would not be a problem in *The White Road*.

One of the consequences of making the real world the same as the game world was that the players had to treat everyone they met as equal characters. Instead of trying to work around them, they had to invite them to participate, even though they had to do it without their knowledge and in a respectful manner. This extreme expansion of liminal space and the consequences thereof had to be handled in a way that enabled the players to cope with the massive input from the real world. Because road knights are commonly known as drunks, we could not deny the fact that alcoholism should be a part of our characters. But using alcohol in larps is usually not very successful. When

people get too drunk, they tend to default back to their own drunken selves, leaving the character behind. But used as a ritual method, like in *Hamlet* (2003), we wanted to explore its possibility to expand the liminality. The inspiration came from one player and his simple experiences with hangovers and drunkenness – start the game with a heavy hangover, and keep that feeling going.

We decided to experiment with *the afterburner method*. The night before the game the players made the final preparations for the game and had a wet party in costume, but not in character. The next day the players woke up in-character and hung over. This fit the road knight mindset perfectly, and afterwards the players kept the buzz



Afterburner method in action. (Photo: the Road Knights)

going by drinking moderate quantities. The point was to avoid getting overly drunk, but at the same time dampen senses and enable players to cope and interact with the real world. The method worked flawlessly.

> I lay awake enjoying the heat and enduring the intense snoring coming from Hvalrusen sleeping next to me. After an hour or so I start to sober up and the snoring gets on my nerves, so I defy the cold autumn night, dragging my sleeping-bag outside the scruffy tent. I go through my pram, increasingly irritated, but with a sigh of relief I find an almost full bottle of cheap martini. Lying in my dirty and smelly sleeping-bag on the cold ground and feeling the booze warming and relaxing me I can only think about how happy I am. Complete freedom, from myself and from the world. And under the stars I eventually fall into a blissful drunken sleep with an empty bottle in my hand. (Player comment.)

The Experience

We found the experience of playing the larp simply amazing. The joint creation process made all players equal, which made them all feel equally important. The very short production time gave the game a great momentum and made the beginning of the game almost overwhelming.

A great surprise to the players was the way the real world forced the characters upon the players: truck drivers we encountered constantly greeted us, confirming our road knight characters as real. When trucks passed by they honked and waved and expected us to wave back. This ritual confirmed that the two different groups, the road knights and the truck drivers, both had their daily life on the road and thus shared a kinship. This experience gave the players confidence in their characters and helped them believe that they would not be exposed as players. During the larp, non-players never exhibited any mistrust toward the players; in their eyes, the characters were real. This left no room for the players to react without the charac-

ter: The players did not have to "perform", they could just "be". The reactions from the bystanders were very friendly and positive almost every time. This is due to the fact that road knights are very well-liked in Denmark, which naturally helped the players a lot.

The way society reflected our social status as road knights was extremely interesting. On the one hand, we accepted our place on the lowest level of society, while on the other we were empowered by the romantic/symbolic value intrinsic in our role as road knights, envied by people because "the free follow the road". We were simply in awe of the way we were given special status and treated with the utmost respect. An example of this was when two of the female players went to a supermarket to use the remaining money on a case of beer, and discovered they did not have enough money to pay for it:

> Foremost, I remember feeling a little sorry for the young clerk behind the supermarket register who had to tell us we didn't have enough money. The line behind us had grown while I – in my rather besotted state – fumbled with the few coins we had, trying by some miracle to make them multiply in my hand. All eyes where on us by then. Normally, the embarrassment would have been agonising, but during our short time on the road we had all hit rock bottom and were by then used to those pitiful looks that met us everywhere without ever reaching our eyes. What I didn't expect was the man standing right behind us in the line helping us to the money we needed. He stood there, an average family dad, with his little son by his hand and smiled as he gave me the DKK 10 we needed, right in front of all the other customers. Damn, it still brings tears to my eyes to think of him. He made that moment magical. (Player comment.)

The only bad experience was when one player left the group to use a private restroom in a shady pub. Just as the player has sat down to relive himself, the door was busted open by one of the regulars who wanted to see if "the filthy hobo had fallen asleep", as he put it. He did not throw the player out, but asked him to leave. Even though we prioritised safety, the only safety measure we could come up with was to stay in one group, or if necessary, break up into smaller ones. Parting from the group could be risky, even dangerous.

We did not meet any real road knights during the game. This problem was discussed extensively before the larp. How to interact with a person when you have basically stolen their identity? We tried to get hold of the real road knights, to hear their opinion, but to no avail. We never found a good solution to this problem. This needs to be resolved before making another larp using this method.

The success of the game involved some amounts of luck as well. The weather was perfect for walking, warm and overcast. The afterburner method also had the intended effect. The players were in a constant state of being more or less intoxicated. Never too drunk to not play, and never too sober to cope with the massive game world.

The distance walked wasn't too much. The baby carriages the players had helped a lot, as nothing had to be carried. The players also only had provisions for half of the trip, which kept the weight down and provided a natural break to the walking, as the players went shopping for more. The movement proved to be an important factor in focusing the players on the narrative. The fact that the characters got closer and closer to their set goal intensified the game. It could be said that the physical movement of the players moved in tandem with the narrative of the larp.

When doing larps with this method, a big issue is the vast amount of trust one needs to put in one's fellow players. Since the character creation is limited, one natural-

ly brings a lot of oneself into the character. Additionally, with alcohol, the very limited number of players, and close physical proximity there is no room for doubt about the intentions of the player-to-player interaction. This could break the balance of the larp, and as such, the trust issue is the main weaknesses of this type of larp. It is not impossible to overcome, one just needs to be very focused on the issue.

Some of the players experienced post-larp depression (Larsson 2003). The reason for this was they went from an almost carefree existence, where the only needs were getting alcohol and food and finding a quiet place to sleep, to the players' complicated lives, with bills to pay and personal relations to maintain.

> When we agree that the larp has finished, I somehow cannot let go of the blissful drunken feeling from the road, wishing it back. A simple and thoughtless life. For every hour that now goes by, I feel increasingly depressed, and once the last of the alcohol wears off, I start to get physically ill. By the time we meet for dinner and debriefing, I am cold sweating, and my hands are shaking uncontrollably... but it stop when I drink my beer! It is quite shocking to me that the larp could have physical as well as existential consequences that extend into my own real life. This made me ponder upon the idea of being "truly happy". (Player comment.)

The transition back to the players' normal lives was quite a bit harder than seen at most other larps. A thorough debriefing and stepping out of the character *(derolling)* is very important in games that are driven by close and intimate social interaction.

This way of producing larps is very easy. With the right idea, the right chemistry, and a trust between the players, you could have an amazing larp with almost no work and within a very short timeframe.

> The atmosphere in the group has been rather tense since we figured out there is no more beer. I stand next to some shrubs, pissing, when the wind (or my swaying) suddenly makes me hit my panties instead of the ground. That it simply the last drop, and angry at the world I hang my piss-drenched panties on my pram to dry since they are my only pair. In an attempt to cheer me up the ever-considerate Hønen gropes the wet panties and smilingly states that they will dry soon in the wind, and that I shouldn't feel down. Not until after the larp do we realise how gross that actually was; in the moment the thought didn't occur at all. (Player comment.)

One of the organisers, Kristin Hammerås, is currently making a documentary about the road knights and has lived on the road with them for several weeks.

Ludography

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Heidi Hopeametsä

24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter

Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero

I studied the larp experience in my master's thesis in Cultural Studies. This paper on Ground Zero *was written as part of my research. My thesis is written in Finnish ("Sen pitää tuntua joltain" — Arjen rajat ylittävä live-roolipelikokemus, 2011) and it opens up what the larp experience is, how it's constructed, and what makes a good experience. The paper reprinted in this book presents the most interesting points of my thesis. In the thesis these ideas — the positive negative experience, immersion in different aspects of the game, experiences that are at the same time real and fictitious — are both backed up by and originally took form based on interviews conducted in 2004 for this research.*

— Heidi Hopeametsä

A player enters the fictional world of larp through a character. However, it is possible to immerse also in other aspects of the game, such as the physical surroundings, the story, or the challenges the game offers. I approach immersion as the way the player engages in a game when pursuing the optimal experience of flow (a concept introduced by Csikszentmihalyi), which can be achieved via these different aspects. I use the larp Ground Zero as an example. The game was a distressing experience, which was nevertheless considered to be positive and valuable by the players. It therefore provides a good case study for discussing immersion, the roles of the player and the character, and experiences which are simultaneously real and fictitious.

> I had thought about the interesting possibilities of the conditions in a bomb shelter as a [setting for a] live action role-playing game. My starting point had to do both with technical aspects (the possibilities given by the closed environment e.g. for using [special] effects to get a stronger and more concrete experience) as well as psychological and social aspects (the closed space, the relationships between people under stress, and the world above them that decides on their fate without them).
>
> Quite soon it began to involve issues about society and ethics concerning the insignificance of the individual under a big system, and the insignificance of seemingly great individual problems when faced with issues of life and death. (Jokinen 2005)[1]

This paper looks at larp as a new form of expression, its characteristics and its potential to provide experiences that are simultaneously real and fictitious. I discuss the concept of immersion and how the optimal experience can be achieved through immersion into different aspects of the game.

I approach the subject through a concrete example, the game *Ground Zero*, which is considered to be among the groundbreaking Finnish larps. *Ground Zero* follows a diverse group of American families from one street in Tulsa as they spend 24 hours in a bomb shelter. The background is an alternate history version of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, in which nuclear war breaks out.

The game was organised by Jami Jokinen and Jori Virtanen in Turku, Finland in 1998, 1999 and 2001, three times with different players. As source material for this paper I have used 13 debriefs[2] and email communication between the organisers and the players on the game mailing list from the 2001 realisation of the game, as well as email interviews with the organisers[3]. When *Ground Zero* was played for the third time, the game was already famous and the participants had expectations concerning the quality of the game. The debriefs were sent to the game mailing the week after the game and they were written for the organisers and the other players.

Creating the Magic Circle of Larp

In larps the participants construct stories by living them in a shared fictional frame-

1 All primary source quotes translated by Syksy Räsänen.

2 The word debrief refers to the post-game event where the players share their experiences, and also to texts about the game from the player's point of view that game organisers often ask players to write after the larp. I sent a request for the debriefs to all 20 participants of the 2001 realisation, and got 16 responses. Everyone who answered was willing to help with my research, but two persons had not written a debrief and one debrief had been lost.

3 I have not played in the game myself.

work which has game-like features. In this paper for practical reasons I refer to larps as "games", because the larp event is commonly referred to as a "game" by larpers. There are almost as many definitions of a game as there are books written about games. In game studies, role-playing games have been classified as "limit cases" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 81-82) or "borderline cases" (Juul 2005, 43) of games because they tend not to fit well the definition of a game for one reason or another. However, in the context of this paper, a perfect definition of a game is not needed, nor is it necessary to decide whether or not larps are games. Role-playing games evolved from miniature wargames (Mackay 2001), and were in the beginning clearly identifiable as games. Role-playing as a form of expression has changed considerably over the years, but it still retains many aspects of playing a game. Recognizing those qualities which have been carried over from more conventional games can be helpful in elucidating the nature of this new form of expression, regardless of how well it fits the definition of a game.

Roger Caillois has examined play as an activity that is free, separate, uncertain and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe (Caillois 1958/2001, 9-10). All play has rules that define it and separate it from ordinary life. In games, rules tend to be explicit. There are larps such as *Ground Zero*, in which there are no explicit rules around which the game would be built, apart from the rules that define the larp space.

> > What kind of rules did the game have?
>
> None, except that the doors to the bomb shelter, which were unlocked for off-game safety reasons, were in-game locked. (Jokinen 2005)

However, all larps have certain implicit rules that the organisers and players have internalised and which are not thought of as rules at all. Everyone knows that the game will end at a certain time or with a given sign, that objects gained during the game usually need to be returned to their owner after the game, and so on. These "invisible" rules make entering the *magic circle*[1] possible, and they provide the framework for the players' actions during the . The magic circle of larp is a fictional world that every participant helps to create by acting in it. Jesper Juul has noted that space in games is a combination of rules and fiction: the level design of a video game can present a fictional world and at the same time determine what the player can and cannot do (Juul 2005, 163). Larp works exactly like this. The fictional world of larp is formed from the physical surroundings, the imagination of the players, and the rules which support the imagination at points where the fictional world differs from the real world. Juul points out that there is an important distinction between the description of a fictional world and the fictional world as it is actually imagined. This is because all fictional worlds are incomplete. (Juul 2005, 122) In a larp, the players have received a description of the fictional world before the game begins, either in a written form or verbally from the organisers, and in the case of *Ground Zero*, players also took part in building the common description already before the game. However, during the actual game every participant further constructs the world by acting in it according to the picture that their imagination has formed of the

game world and its inhabitants. Markus Montola has described this phenomenon as constructing diegeses[2] in interaction.

1 Magic circle is a term that Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have borrowed from Johan Huizinga to describe the special place in time and space created by a game. This is where the game takes place, and playing a game means entering the magic circle, or creating it as the game begins. (Salen & Zimmerman 2005, 95)

2 Diegesis means a fictional world or the truth about what exists in a fictional

According to Montola, every participant in a role-playing game constructs their diegesis when playing, and role-playing is the interaction of these diegeses. (Montola 2003)

Roger Caillois divides games into four categories based on the attitude that the player has towards the game. These categories help explain why players enjoy the game: *agôn* (competition; "the desire to win by one's merit in regulated competition"), *alea* (chance; "the submission of one's will in favor of anxious and passive anticipation of where the wheel will stop"), *mimicry* (simulation; "the desire to assume strange personality") and *ilinx* ("the pursuit of vertigo"). (Caillois 1958/2001, 11-12, 44) In agôn, the player relies only upon himself and his utmost efforts; in alea, he counts on everything except himself, submitting to the powers that elude him; in mimicry, he imagines that he is someone else, and he invents an imaginary universe; in ilinx, he gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience. (Caillois 1958/2001, 44)

Caillois has a rigid view about the attitude associated with a given game. In particular, though a game may belong to multiple categories, there are certain categories which Caillois considers incompatible: for example, no game can belong to both agôn and ilinx, or to both alea and mimicry (Caillois 1958/2001, 72-73). However, it is a peculiar feature of larp that, while it always involves mimicry, all of the other attitudes can be present or absent in different mixtures, not only in different games, but also for different players in a given game. In the examples considered by Caillois, playing a given game necessarily involves a given attitude; the attitudes are a fixed property of the games. In larp the situation is different: a given larp can include a mixture of all four categories in varying proportions for each player. This versatility of larps, their ability to simultaneously involve any or all attitudes of gaming identified by Caillois, may in part explain the appeal of larps. Just as the players in a larp define the fictional world by acting in it, they define the character of the game by their expectations and attitudes. Attitudes are not only qualities of games, they can also be qualities of players.

Ground Zero is an example of a game combining mimicry, alea and ilinx. It featured immersion in fictional characters and acting out their roles, the players were subjected to chance as they did not know how the events were going to unfold, and the game elicited strong emotions caused by the closed space, distressing situation and special effects. *Ground Zero* is somewhat unusual for a larp in that there was no possibility for agôn: the organisers explicitly told the players that they are expected to immerse in the game through their character, and emphasized the fact that there are no quests to solve (Jokinen 2001b).

Immersion and Flow

How does one enter the magic circle, the fictional world? In larp this always happens through a character. Mike Pohjola (2004) even defines role-playing as "immediated character immersion"[1]. But what is immersion?

When we are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter – when we really throw ourselves into the act and forget the surrounding world – we are immersed

world. Diegesis includes everything we know about the world. In addition to the facts about the diegetic material reality, it includes perceived history, expectations of future, hidden knowledge and secret feelings. (Montola 2003)

1 By this, Pohjola refers to an idea of "immediate art" that is experienced as it is created and has no use for the division between performers and audience. (Pohjola 2004)

in the game that we are playing, the book we are reading, the music we're listening to, and so on. This kind of experience of immersive engagement is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls a *flow* experience. He describes it as

> a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rulebound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about other problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 71)

Flow gives a deep sense of enjoyment through the feeling that we are in control of our actions. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is an end in itself: the act of doing is a reward in itself (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). This is an accurate description of larp experience at its best.

Csikszentmihalyi explains that enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are finely balanced with the person's capacity to act (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 52), and that flow is a subjective experience and dependent on the person's attitude: there is no guarantee that someone will have a flow experience even if their skills and the challenges that the activity provides would seem to match perfectly. It is not the real challenges which matter, but the person's perception of them, and likewise it is not the person's skills, but the skills they think they have. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 75) In the context of video game studies, Jesper Juul has argued that flow does not explain the fascination with mechanically repeating trivial tasks, because repetition should lead to boredom but that doesn't always happen (Juul 2005, 112). But what Csikszentmihalyi posits is that it is possible to find flow anywhere, even in the most boring, repetitive tasks. He gives many examples how people who e.g. work in factories can find flow in their very repetitive job. The key is to set goals for oneself, to build a framework for achieving flow in places where most people would find no challenge. The quality of experience can be transformed at will. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 145-157)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, games – among other activities such as making music and rock climbing – are designed to make optimal experience easier to achieve. What makes games particularly rewarding is that they are built to make it possible to go beyond expectations, to achieve something unexpected. In larps, the magic circle of the game provides a safe, controlled environment, where the players can have experiences they are not able to have – or may not even want to have – in real life.

In this paper I make the assumption that every player ideally wants to find flow from the game she plays. So, in this context, with "immersion" I mean *the way the player engages in a game when she pursues the optimal experience.*

Immersion is not the same as flow: it is a means of achieving flow. Immersion implies surrendering oneself to the game, which is necessary for experiencing flow. Of course flow doesn't occur every time a player immerses in a game, but the possibility is always there, and that makes playing worthwhile. Immersion is easier in some games than in others, depending on the game design, but flow is a highly subjective experience. It is possible to find the flow experience even in games where the design does not support it.

Flow can be achieved through different aspects of the game. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä's gameplay experience model divides immersion into sensory, chal-

lenge-based and imaginative immersion[1]. The model was developed for video game research, but it offers useful a framework also for roleplaying studies. Sensory immersion is achieved through the audiovisual aspects of a game. In larp, this would be everything we experience through our senses; the physical surroundings and the characters of the fictional world. Challenge-based immersion is achieved when one has a satisfying balance between abilities and challenges related to motor and/or mental skills. In larp this includes mental, social and motor skills; from emotional challenges to fights and succeeding in plotting, for example. Imaginative immersion is the experience of becoming absorbed with the stories and the world, or identifying with a game character, which is exactly the same in larp. These three dimensions of immersion usually mix and overlap. (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005) This division helps seeing the aspects through which one can find the optimal experience in larp.

J. Tuomas Harviainen separates three possible levels of immersion in larp: character, reality and narrative immersion (Harviainen 2003), which is interesting because all these could be placed under imaginative immersion in Ermi & Mäyrä's model. However, it is possible for a player to approach a larp as a game with specific goals to achieve (agôn attitude), and where the success can be readily evaluated by how well one succeeds in these tasks. Even though this approach, which falls under challenge-based immersion, is not immersion in the sense usually understood in the context of role-playing games, it can provide the experience of flow just as well as immersion in imaginative or sensory aspects of the game. Harviainen's division can be used to complement Ermi & Mäyrä's model: it presents the components of imaginative immersion in larp and makes it explicit that character immersion is only one of these.

True Fiction: The Player as the Character

Gary Alan Fine separates three layers of identity present in the gameplay of role-playing games: person, player and character. Player is the participant as someone playing the game. The players have some knowledge of the structure of the game as they control their characters. But at the same time, they are the characters too, and on the other hand they are people in a social context apart from their role as players[2]. During a gameplay session one switches between these frames. (Fine 1983/2002, 186, 196-197)

It is common to describe the process of "becoming" a larp character as character immersion, which involves the assumption that during the game the player is her character, and that she thinks and acts as the character and not as the player. This is linked to immersive fallacy, as presented by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "*the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality*" (2004, 450-452). Salen and Zimmerman stress the fact that the player becomes engrossed in the game through the act of playing, which is a process of metacommunication, a double-consciousness in which the player is aware of the artificiality of the play situation.

> But the very thing that makes their activity play is that they also know they are participating within a constructed reality, and are consciously taking on the artificial meanings of the magic cir-

1 The model is reminiscent of the Caillois' categories: sensory – ilinx, challenge-based – agôn, imaginary – mimicry. Only the alea attitude of subjecting oneself to chance is not present.

2 Because I don't consider in more detail the player identity of the person who participates in the game, for reasons of readability I use the the term "player" in its usual sense of a participant who is simultaneously a person and a player.

> cle. It is possible to say that the players of a game are "immersed" – immersed in meaning. To play a game is to take part in a complex interplay of meaning. But this kind of immersion is quite different from the sensory transport promised by the immersive fallacy. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 452)

Switching between the frames of character, player and person can happen even during very intense moments in a larp, as the following post-game description of the events shows:

> Then, by coincidence, Mrs Stanislavski [a character] started talking about the same psalm! What a coincidence, I thought. I got a bible from the mormon priest who had lost his faith, to read the psalm aloud. The mood in the bomb shelter was really oppressive, as the children and women were weeping in shock. I read the psalm aloud and then I was FOR REAL so moved that my voice broke FOR REAL (it wasn't acting). Then I decided that, okay, now it's going to happen that [my character] James Willis will see the light, because otherwise it wouldn't be believable for such a tough man to be so moved. (Debrief 1, capitalization in the original)

In *Ground Zero*, the players were informed in advance that the game is based on the depth of the characters and their relationships, and not on a plot or on completing tasks (Jokinen 2001b). The building of a common fiction started in July 2001, three months before the game, when the characters had been allocated to the players (Virtanen 2001a). The players were provided with the essential background and personality of the character, which they used to build their characters with the game organisers and the other players (Virtanen 2001b, Jokinen 2005). Players of a given family discussed the relationships within the family, and for example the players of children went through what kinds of games they played together. On the mailing list, the players shared tips about web pages with information about the dress for the era, discussed the attitudes toward music and religion and organised movie nights where they watched popular movies from 1962. A few weeks before the game the organisers started sending daily news of the game world to the mailing list, and encouraged the players to send emails describing their characters' activities that would be visible to the other street residents. In the evening before the actual game there was a pre-game: the characters had a barbecue party. This was meant to give the players a feel for the characters in an ordinary situation, before the crisis. The intention was just to prepare the players for the game, but many players considered the pre-game to already be an important part of the game. (Jokinen 2005, and messages on the game mailing list) This way the players built the game world and fitted their subjective diegeses together as seamlessly as possible already before the game.

The players knew beforehand how the game begins: the air raid siren rings on Sunday morning, October 28, 1962, and the characters hastily gather inside the bomb shelter.

> The door closes.
>
> The only contact with the outside world is the radio, and from newscasts it becomes clear, bit by bit, that this is not a drill but a real crisis.
>
> The horrible events of the world fill the bomb shelter. Different people react differently, the situation aggravates and undoes old social problems and creates new ones. Many things are seen in a different proportion.
>
> Finally, the electricity fails and the shockwave [from a hit by a nuclear warhead on the city] creates an apocalyptic mood. The city above the shelter is gone. The radio is silent, the characters are enclosed in the shelter. It

has become their salvation, prison or grave. (Jokinen 2005)

In the real world, the game took place in the basement of a youth center, which had been set up to look like a bomb shelter from the 1960s. The organisers had hidden speakers in the game area that they could manipulate from outside. They were used for the radio broadcasts and for the sound effect simulating the shockwave, which created a physical sensation of the floors and the walls shaking. The characters had no influence over these predetermined events, but otherwise the game flowed from the relationships between the characters as interpreted by the players who immersed in them, without any goals or interference from the organisers. (Jokinen 2005)

In larps like *Ground Zero*, the character cannot know more than the player[1]. Checking information that the character should know but the player doesn't by going off-character, stepping outside the magic circle, would violate the rules of the game[2]. Therefore careful preparation is called for: "*As a player I should have remembered to say that I am a weight watcher and ask people not to bring sweet energy bomb desserts, but as I didn't remember, [my character] James heartily gobbled up all the sweets.*" (Debrief 1, regarding the pregame.)

That the player feels that he is the character, while recognizing that it's a game is apparent in the descriptions of real-life activities where players refer to themselves by the names of the characters: "*We of the Willis family decided already on Friday afternoon to play the breakfast in-game […]*" (Debrief 1).

A debrief describes the bomb shelter experience from one character's point of view[3]. This includes private thoughts, the player reflecting on the situation through their character. The characters weighed their life and the things most important to them, dealing with the crisis in different ways. The level shared with other players during the game included the display of these inner emotions, actions like weeping and sleeping, and events caused by social tensions which erupted in the atmosphere of fear and despair: quarrels, apologies, confessions, expressions of love, settling of accounts, and helping others.

Some players write in the first person, some in the third person, and it is com-

1 In some larps, typically more goal-oriented ones, it is permissible, and indeed common, to step away from the game world and ask questions as a player and then step back in again.

2 On the other hand, the character doesn't know everything that the player knows: "As a player I have grades in chemistry and biochemistry, so I knew well that it was just a harmless color change reaction, but [my character] James of course didn't. To his wife he said "How about that, the commie's daughter is studying how to make bombs"." (Debrief 1)

3 The game begins with the characters rushing into the bomb shelter straight from breakfast. At first the characters think that this is just a drill, and spend their time by arranging practical matters inside the shelter, and for example playing Risk or cards, reading a book, and listening to programs and music from the radio. The news broadcasts provide information about the outside world at regular intervals. By noon the characters hear that war has broken out, and the atmosphere becomes more serious. After the nuclear bomb explodes at 17:25, the game organisers no longer interfere with the events in the bomb shelter. The game goes on until morning, when a soldier (played by one of the game organisers) knocks on the door of the bomb shelter, asks for the number of survivors and says that he is not permitted to say what has happened outside. The game ends a couple of hours later.

mon to explain the character's background or thoughts so that the readers (assumed to be the game organisers and other players) can better understand the motives and actions of the character. Debriefs often include descriptions of feelings or thoughts during the game, but as they usually have been written into a seamless story, they are presented as the feelings and thoughts of the character, not the player.

On the basis of the text it is impossible to say how the player experienced the events as a person, unless she explicitly comments on it, which seems not to be the rule. Perhaps this is because of the common assumption – and ideal – that one has to immerse in the character so deeply that there is no division between the character's and the player's experience. Debrief is above all a description of the events of the game: one player even apologised for not writing a debrief, even though she had written many pages of thoughts brought on by the game[1].

In the comments accompanying the debriefs some players explicitly wrote that the character was very different from them, and that they had thought that it would therefore be difficult to immerse in the character, but:

> To my enormous confusion the immersion experience was incredibly strong, and it was actually frightening to notice how the character's *reactions* were often almost completely different from the way the player reacts, be it in scary, sad or happy situations. Before the game I didn't believe that it would be possible to achieve such a perfect experience of immersion in any game. (Debrief 7)

Even though *Ground Zero* was "only a game" and the players knew that the situation was fictitious, the experience was very strong[2]:

> Many of the character's experiences and feelings were almost genuine reactions to situations such as the reality of the explosion. There was no division anymore into which one of us was scared, me or [my character] April, because we were the same person, I. And I was scared. I had genuinely slipped quite far into shock and it was long before I [realised that I] heard distant talking, as [my character's husband] Richard tried to calm me down. The moment was very real and strong. (Debrief 9)

> Before I hadn't thought it possible that one could get so strongly into character. I didn't even THINK many off-game thoughts during the game. I even saw in-game dreams in my sleep. (Debrief 1, capitalization in the original)

> Let me say right away that I have never felt as strongly a terrible need for human closeness and a bottomlessly deep loneliness than I did at times as Stephanie during the game. (Debrief 2)

Immediately after the game ended, the game organisers began the debrief session, where the players were told what will happen over the next two months in the bomb shelter. The characters will notice that the shelter had not fully withstood the blast and moisture will seep in, symptoms of radiation sickness will appear and at least two of the characters will die of radiation sickness (the organisers did not say which

1 I have included such messages as debriefs for this study.

2 Reading the comments about the game, I noticed the players used expressions such as "huge", "incredibly great", "incredibly strong". In the original Finnish, such words are even stronger than in English. This suggests that the players felt that the experience was almost too powerful to put into words.

two), apathy will take hold, morale will falter, and when the characters finally get out, they will find that nothing at all is left on the surface. This look into the future was not part of the game as such. However, it certainly affected the game experience, especially because it occurred right after the game, when the roles of the person and character had not yet become clearly separate.

> Ha, cruel gamemasters; leaving the fates of the characters open was exceptionally cruel. Now, after guessing and pondering, I had to look for possible fates by reading from the webpages of the city of Hiroshima a history of the time after the atom bomb, and a pile of (e.g. cancer) research about the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and became completely depressed. :((Debrief 7)

However, in the next paragraph, the player again thanks for a great game.

The gamelay experience achieved as a character can affect the player as a person. It is hard to draw the line between the player and the character, especially with regard to emotional reactions and sensory impressions. During a larp, one doesn't change between the player, person and character frames as visibly as in a tabletop role-playing game, even though these frames are present. Even supposing that the player has given up her own identity during the game and taken on the identity of the character, the person playing the game is physically present throughout the larp. The character's physical experiences are also experiences of the player, and she can learn from them.

The Positive Negative Experience

The game organisers warned the players about the distressing nature of the game beforehand (Jokinen 2001a) so that the players knew what to expect. Everyone voluntarily stayed in the bomb shelter until the end of the game, even though they were free to leave at any moment if they found it emotionally too difficult to continue.

> None of these [flow] experiences may be particularly pleasurable at the time they are taking place, but afterward we think back on them and say, "That really was fun" and wish they would happen again. After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown [...] (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 46.)

How was the distressing experience seen as a positive experience? What did the players learn from *Ground Zero*?

The game offered, in a safe environment, an experience which was real and fictitious at the same time. The players spent 24 stressful hours in a (simulated) bomb shelter, weeping, fearing for the worst, but knowing that the situation was not real, and they could reflect on the situation from an outsider's perspective. This is not dissimilar to reading a book or watching a movie – except that in a larp you are physically, concretely present in the situation and have influenced the way things have happened, by interacting with the game world and the other players.

The events of the game and the emotions it raised were discussed in the debrief session after the game, and also later with friends and on the game mailing list. Two players mentioned they had cried when they had thought about the game several days later, and one player said that new interpretations about the game arise every day. The "fictitious" experiences had, on some level, been real experiences. Satu Heliö has noted that the post-game debrief session offers opportunities for the individual players to narrativise their experiences of the game. By verbalising the actions she took during the game, a player builds a story out of the game. (Heliö 2004) On the basis of the debriefs, it seems that many players felt a strong need to process the game experience in writing, and narrativising after the

event defines a space for interpretations. One of the players mentioned at the end of her debrief that writing really helps in dealing with the emotions brought on by the game. The debrief shapes a narrative out of the events of the game, and the act of writing the debrief can be seen as a part of the process of coming to terms with the game experience, while not capturing the totality of the game experience:

> I've written the text below two--three times. [...] It still doesn't capture what went on in my head and in my stomach during those 26 hours. (Debrief 13)

None of the players complained about being distressed and scared during the game, even though everyone described these feelings, at least from their character's point of view. One person even wrote that he enjoys immersion in "negative" emotions more than immersion in "positive" emotions, and would gladly have played in an even more distressing situation. On the contrary, the players emphasize one after another what an incredibly amazing and moving experience the game had been:

> I can't say that it was "fun", as that would be corny considering the topic of the game and so on. But I'm very pleased that I could be there. The experience was _really_ huge. A large part of the game took place inside my head and it was an incredibly great experience that I wouldn't exchange for anything. The warnings from the game organisers about the intensity and oppressiveness of the game were not in vain. (Debrief 1)

> And I wouldn't exchange the experience for anything. I am extremely pleased and grateful to have had it and the thoughts it has brought. (Debrief 8)

The players mentioned that the closed space brought a particularly powerful physical sensation, as two rooms were shared between twenty people and there was no possibility to retreat into a personal space. As the players (and their characters) didn't know what was happening in the outside world, the couple dozen steps they could take in the bomb shelter marked the limits of their world. One player says that the game changed her world on a personal level, and another interpreted the game as a statement for activism that prompts people to think about political issues in general. Many people highlighted the relationships and the closeness between people, and players had very strong experiences from playing family relationships in an extremely distressing situation. For example, players said that the game offered a deeper understanding of how people endure in and adapt to difficult situations, how important it is to take care of others, and that even small things can be important. For one player, the experience proved that normal, good motherhood is possible, and showed that love can exist and keep you going even in the most horrible situations.

The way the players wrote about their feelings concerning the game suggests that they had found the flow experience in *Ground Zero*. The game design supported the possibility of achieving the flow experience using all three dimensions of immersion presented in Ermi & Mäyrä's model. Closed space and special effects such as the radio transmissions and the shockwave supported sensory immersion, and the human relationships, closeness, the reactions of others and so on naturally had a big role; in larp the player is inside the game's fiction physically and through all senses. Imaginative immersion was character and world oriented, as there was no preplanned plot. The distressing conditions in the game provided also mental (emotional) challenges. It seems that the organisers succeeded well in their experimentation on the technical, psychological and social aspects that was the starting point for organizing the game.

> No previous game has generated such strong feelings in me during the game or afterwards, made me care about the characters so much or made me think

about live role-playing from such a completely new perspective. (Debrief 7)

Conclusions

Larp has the potential to produce works of art and spells of entertainment, like literature, theatre and cinema, and *Ground Zero* presents an interesting example of larp as a medium developing beyond entertainment.

The player debriefs testify that the game was an intensive, claustrophobic and distressing experience, but also an experience that the players considered a remarkably good one, and one from which they have learned many positive things. The way the players wrote about their characters and their gameplay experience in the debriefs demonstrates how events in larps are real and fictitious at the same time. The players experienced very real emotions and reactions to fictional events, and they also learned from these "fictitious" experiences. This happened not simply by watching and interpreting as in passive media like movies or books, but by living the events themselves.

Commonly, immersion has been taken to mean immersion in the character. J. Tuomas Harviainen has written about how the player can immerse not just in the character, but also in the story and the game world. In this paper I have taken a broader view, along the lines of the gameplay experience model of Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, which divides immersion into imaginative, sensory and challenge-based immersion. The three kinds of immersion discussed by Harviainen can all be seen as different components of imaginative immersion. The flow experience in *Ground Zero* can be understood as arising through all three kinds of immersion considered by Ermi & Mäyrä. It is possible to achieve flow experience through just one form of immersion, but the fact that all of them were strongly present in *Ground Zero* and supported each other helps to explain why the experience was so powerful.

Role-playing games, including larps, offer the possibility of affecting the fictional events, of making things happen, of taking part, which is something the traditional, passive media cannot provide. In larp the player is physically present in the fictional world, and participates in constructing the fiction and maintaining the illusion of reality by constantly imagining and thus creating the subjective diegesis. This new form of expression offers novel possibilities for immersion and "being another", something that needs to be studied and understood more.

> I also want to tell you – after the game I strongly felt that I'm done with larping for the moment. Ground Zero was such a pure and strong experience that I will never encounter its like again. [It is] The same kind of feeling that at least I get after reading a very good book. After that I get the feeling that I won't find anything better anywhere, so it's pointless to try.
>
> Maybe this will pass with time, like the strange sensation that's still going around my stomach. (A player on the game mailing list a few days after the game.)

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Gabriel Widing

Post Panopticon

This was my first text published in English. I was 21 and had been one year in the aesthetics program at the university. I had immediately fallen in love with French critical theory and of course I wanted to get help from those awesome philosophers to think about what I was occupied with: roleplaying, games and politics. The basic analysis of the scenario in this text is still valid. I was happy when it got some new attention when Panopticorp *was organized again ten years after its first installment. All references to theory are a bit dubious though, as I honestly didn't have much clue about what I was writing about.*

— Gabriel Widing

Analysing live-action role-playing has always been problematic. The subjectivity of every experience makes the personal reflection a lame weapon for an analysis. We need to find new ways of writing about the phenomenon. Any attempt to go farther than a diary from character/player perspective or "the food was very bad" is welcome. This article is an attempt to use and introduce post-structuralism as a tool for looking at role-playing. It is about how signs and symbols are used and created. It is about positions and perspectives. It is about power.

The post-structural theory has been developed in many scientific fields. Some examples are Foucault's historian writings on social thoughts, Barthes' analysis of media, Lacan's neopsychoanalysis and Derrida's philosophy of signs. It has also been a crucial element in contemporary feminist theory underlined by writers like Weedon.

I will use the poststructuralist approach to deconstruct the Norwegian contemporary scenario *Panopticorp*, by Irene Tanke.[1] I will read the "text" Panopticorp, and view it as a frame for the interaction. Panopticorp was a story about an international advertising agency. Real life agencies like Panopticorp work with the production of meaning in the media environment and everyday life. The scenario made great use of language to construct identities, divisions and the illusion of something different than everyday life. The conscious way of creating the frames for this scenario made it one of the most interesting and dangerous events in the year 2003.

Taking the Job

The participants of Panopticorp enrolled as the employees of a multinational corporation with the same name as the event itself. The registration for the event was an on-line employment form for people going to the newly started Panopticorp Oslo Unit. This way of enlisting brought the fiction close to "the real world" and challenged the traditional agreement of live-action role-playing to never let fiction and reality meet. The participants were put in the position of a character, but without the context of the enactment.

Only one thing was given to the participants in printed media: The corporate dictionary, CorpDic. The contents of this folder framed the whole event, putting focus on certain perspectives while marginalizing others. It presented dozens of concepts, transforming language and the usage of it:

> CorpSpeak – The 'slang' of Corpers. Since CorpSpeak embodies PanoptiCorps CorpFil and organisational structure, mastering CorpSpeak is not just a question of 'fitting in' but a measure of ones understanding of how PanoptiCorp works. (Panopticorp CorpDic, 2002)

Language is a way of positioning. The dictionary most certainly structured the character interpretation and expression in certain patterns. In most role-playing events, the organisers define and state an agreement with terms and rules that everybody must obey. As a participant one can chose to accept those terms, or just avoid signing up for the event. This is very important in order to make the medium function. But participants must be conscious about that they are surrendering a lot of power to the organisers. Sometimes the organisers define the participants' life conditions for days.

Living the Job

> CorpFil – The Corporate Philosophy of PanoptiCorp. Reflected in our way

1 Panopticorp was played in Oslo, Norway between the 17th – 20th of July in 2003. The genre of the game was contemporary political realism. There were circa 30 participants. The game was arranged by Irene Tanke, Jared Elgvin, Eirik Fatland, Kaisa Lindahl, Cath Røsseland, Espen Nodeland, Rune Haugen, Trine Lindahl and Erling Rognli.

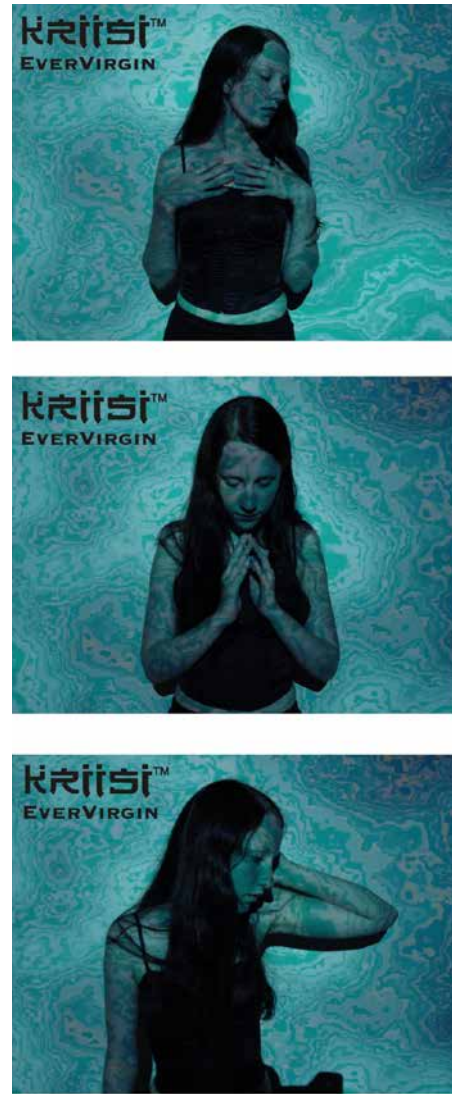
> of life and work. The core of our CorpFil is that optimum (NexSec) CreaProd is achieved through the creation of functional MemeFields within horizontal, competitive, organisational structures. Because of our emphasis on MemeFields over formal structure, CorpSpeak is not just 'office slang' but an embodiment of our corporate identity. (CorpDic)

Abandoning one's own language transforms one's way of thinking, which is a method for immersing into the character and the surrounding setting. All the characters at Panopticorp had clearly defined roles, different classes and functions at the agency. Those roles had new concepts attached to them; carders, dozers, spotters, divers, suits and more. The participants did not have any pre-understanding of these words, which made it possible for the organisers to maintain total control of the definitions.

The Panopticorp unit was the life of the characters. They ate at the agency, they slept at the agency and they even shagged at the agency. During the days of the event the Panopticorp agency was the one and only reality for both participants and their characters.

The agency had new concepts for the relation to time. "Now" was never good enough. The characters strived for being "NexSec", trying to guess their way towards the next upcoming hot ideas, brands or persons. Saying something that became interpreted as "LasSec" ruined one's social status for hours or even days.

Since Panopticorp was a contemporary, realistic scenario, there was an unexplored possibility to let "real people" without characters enter the event, without even knowing that it was a fiction. Would this be an offensive act, degenerating their reality, or would it be an invitation to take part in our reality? I still wait for scenarios with the courage to explore these possibilities.



(Photo: Heiko Romu)

Decentralized Hierarchy

> Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural appa-

> ratus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Michel Foucault, Panopticism)

The panopticon theory, which inspired the name of the event, was written by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. Imagine panopticon as a cylinder with prison cells all around. The cells have one open wall, only covered with bars, as transparent as the fourth wall of a theatre stage. In the middle of the cylinder there is a tower with windows black as sunglasses. From the tower, all prisoners can be watched. The people in the tower cannot look at all prisoners at the same time, but the prisoners do not now when they are under surveillance, only the fact that they are. Panopticorp was somewhat different.

Take away the tower, so the prisoners can see each other, and give the prisoners reason (shorter sentence for example) to report on each other – then you have Panopticorp. The corporation had a flat structure, with no bosses or certain demands from owners (except profit, of course). There was no board of directors. Still, the characters were strictly put in a dynamic but hierarchic order. This was visualised through the HotNot-system:

> HotNot – The standard PanoptiCorp system of rating performance, HotNot votes occur at least daily at any Unit. Unlike the rating systems of more LasSec agencies, where the Human Resources director performs the rating, PanoptiCorps HotNot is democratic, giving all co-workers an equal vote in HotNot ratings. (CorpDic)

Depending on your status in the hotnot, you were assigned different roles on projects of different importance. It visualized the current hierarchies within the agency. It is evident that the repression that used to originate from the top of the hierarchy can actually be distributed and shared by all.

An Illusion of Power?

Live-action role-playing is generally far more democratic than most other media. It decentralizes the power of stimuli creation, breaking down the traditional mass communicational idea of a few producers sending stimuli to many consumers. But since live-action role-playing claims to be an anti-authoritarian medium it is very important to be aware what kinds of power structures are created. One should not be content with the conclusion that the medial structures are far more democratic than TV. Exactly what are the functions and positions of organisers, writers, participants and others in relation to the project?

One authoritarian position is stated in *The Manifesto of the Turku School* by Mike Pohjola:

> The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the player enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. The players' part is to get inside their character's head in the situation where the game begins and by eläytyminen try to simulate it's actions. (Pohjola 1999)

The turkuists consider the organiser to be an artist in a very modernist sense of the word. The organiser is a genius and God. The participants should be grateful that they are allowed into the brilliant artistic work that the organiser has set up. The participants are the puppets of a content puppet master. This approach is honest, but hardly desirable. I want to consider live-action role-playing as a fellow-creating process. The organiser must be ready to lose control of the event.

Another view is represented by the Norwegian manifesto *Dogma 99*, written by Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård. They claim that

the organisers should not in any way manipulate or direct the story:

> 5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it. [...] As organisers take control during a LARP, the players become passive. This leads to players learning to expect organiser control, even demanding it. Only a LARP entirely without organiser influence will place the real initiative in the hands of players, where it belongs. As we learn how to make LARPs work independent of organiser control and influence, it will become possible to develop more constructive and activating methods of organiser interaction. (Fatland & Wingård 1999)

Participants will never be free from the control of the organisers, but they should be aware of when and how they are manipulated. Dogma 99 wants to give the power over the event to the participants. But the organiser still defines the themes and agendas. The participants have freedom, but only within the framework defined by the organisers.

There is a difference between control before and after the event has begun. If the organisers are communicative and give input during the enactment, they become part of the process. If they only set the frames, they do not partake in the development of the actual event. I prefer organisers that dare to be fellow-creators of their own event. And I prefer to be participating in setting the frames of an event, even if my only function during the enactment is to play my character.

The participants of live-action role-playing events are often denied the possibility to partake in the designing of the milieu, rule system and dramaturgy of an event. Panopticorp took this even further. The participants became deeply manipulated by the clever organisers as they gave away their language and thus their thoughts. After just a day many participants were thinking like binary machines: hot/not, lassec/nexsec, upcard/downcard, always judging co-workers as effective or worthless. It took weeks for me to erase the thinking of dividing people into useful or non-useful out of my mind.

This is not a matter of morals. The organisers of Panopticorp made their point very clear. It was a brilliant mind-fuck and an indispensable learning experience. Unfortunately the structures of Panopticorp are not just fiction, they are real. Dr. Meredith Belbin is one of the profilers in the teamwork company that bears his name:

> Over the years many people have been interested in the team role theory expounded in my book Management Teams *Why They Succeed or Fail* first printed in 1981. More and more jobs involve people working together and here the roles individuals play are very important. With our new online version of team role feedback, we aim to give individuals a fuller insight into their own behaviour in the workplace by taking account of how they are seen by others. The reports include advice on developing a personal management style suited to your team role profile. (Belbin, on his website.)

This is scary. Role-playing could be a great defence against the assigning of roles from the surroundings, but only if we are not blind to our own processes. Participants should be part of the pre-process. Organisers should partake in the story. Both participants and organisers should refuse *their* assigned roles as participants or organisers.

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Johanna Koljonen

The Dragon Was the Least of It

Dragonbane and Larp as Ephemera and Ruin

At the end of the larp Dragonbane I was surrounded by nice Swedish larpers I didn't know, who had all had an amazing experience. When they kindly included me in their post-game excitement and I suggested mildly some things had not worked at all, a strangely un-Swedish thing happened — they shut me out of the conversation. I had not been particularly hostile, but whatever I had mentioned was not anything they cared to hear about, as though it in some way diminished the value of their experience. Reflecting later on what had happened, I realised they were right. I had threatened their truth about what the game had been.

I must have come across Stanley Fish's book on the authority of interpretive communities, Is there a text in this class? a year or two before writing this essay. I probably hadn't read it, but exposure to its ideas did affect my thinking. My worry about larp documentation dates back at least to the Hamlet essay reprinted elsewhere in this book, but only now was I able to express why it mattered.

A book-length evaluation of Dragonbane, by Tiinaliisa Multamäki, Tiina Kuustie and myself, is available online at http://stuff.wanderer.org/DB_the_Legacy.pdf or http://web.archive.org/web/20120216093943/http://stuff.wanderer.org/DB_the_Legacy.pdf.

— Johanna Koljonen



Building the temple. (Photo: Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

The international fantasy larp Dragonbane (July 27th – August 4th, 2006) was unprecedented in ambition, the promises of the organisers including a functional village, working magic and a life-size fire-breathing animatronic dragon. In this essay, Johanna Koljonen describes some of the production's challenges and successes, in the context of a wider discussion on how and why larps should be documented.

Imagine a fantasy live action role-playing game completely free from the usual pseudo-Tolkien feudal clichés. An international game, where larpers from all over the world could play in their own languages; six days in character around the clock; exciting and challenging to adults, yet equally appropriate for young children; focused on human relations and conflict resolution rather than fighting and conflict creation. A fictional religion with real complexities. A magical world that is physically present – real houses, sheep, a bakery, forest camps in a stunning wilderness setting. Real, functional props to fill the village with every-day life and memories of its past. Good-looking latex weapons provided by the organisers for characters likely to carry them. And most importantly: magic that works. Supernatural lights! Real firebolts! A life-size animatronic dragon!

This was the promise of the makers of the 2006 fantasy game *Dragonbane*[1]. And bar

1 Dragonbane (2006) Timo Multamäki (producer, corporate partners), Maija Nevala (content), Niki Bergman (communications, press), Heiko Romu (dragon, set), Timo Leipold (offgame), Janne Särkelä (audio & dance), Ester Lautumio (translation), Morgan Jarl (characters), Jeremy Naus (webmaster), Eero Alasalmi (dragon mechanics), Pauli Sundberg (dragonware), Henri Sareskivi (dragon electrical systems), Tiinaliisa Turunen (public funding), Mikko Kekäläinen (enviroenment), Sören Parbeck (boot camp), Kalle Kivimaa (finance), Teemu Hukkanen (IT-admin), Mikko Mähönen (documentary), Simon Farel (graphics), Esa Arbelius (props), Arno Hahma (SFX team), Antti Oksanen (gizmo),

one game day being cut to finish building the village, and bar the fact that not all players of all backgrounds managed to stay in character for the duration, this is what the makers of *Dragonbane* delivered[1].

I admit. I am cheating a little. I am not being specific. The game was intended to accommodate a larger number than 325 players. The dragon was meant to be able to raise its eyebrows and breathe fire. And there was another promise too: that during the game we players would not have to see anything that did not belong to the fiction. That ambition was not realised.

The players saw plastic buckets in the loos, electrical wires running in the grass along the road, special effects crew in orange coveralls, even the occasional car. And the dragon, with most of its animatronic nerves and muscles malfunctioning, very obviously moved on visible wheels. These modern elements were incredibly frustrating, given the efforts of most players to comply fully with the very strict rules on equipment brought to the game. But they were hardly unique in fantasy larps. And it was possible, with only a little effort, to manoeuvre around most of them.

Yes, the fact that they were there was testament to the chaotic state of the organisation on the arrival of the players. And yes, many players were understandably upset at the amount of work they themselves needed to contribute in the last pre-game days for the village to be ready to play in. Having to drop one day of game-play for the purpose – the experimental "if-game" day, when we were meant to play our way into our characters, and develop common memories for them – was a sacrifice that at the time felt very heavy indeed.

Read that first paragraph again, though. Just consider for a moment the insanity of the enterprise and the vastness of what was achieved. I mean, really. The dragon was the least of it. Saying that the dragon was broken, the organisation exhausted and the game's aesthetic premise compromised is easy. Explaining how the game was also a success is difficult. Even just defining what, exactly, we mean by "the game" or "success" is a very complicated matter.

Immediate Aftermaths

Imagine a book club based on the premise that all participants read a handful of chapters from the same novel, dividing it up between them, so that most or all participants read the key moments, but the rest of the chapters are randomly assigned. The book club would then meet to discuss the book, reconstructing a sort of ghost-text in the process: an uncanny fiction of a novel that has never existed and will never be read. Imagine that even the partial texts are burnt before the meeting, so that it is not possible to go back and check against one's memory.

Then imagine members of the book club reconvening a week later, a year later, to talk about the book again. How long would their personal impressions of the story remain vivid? At what point would the collective reading subsume the individual experience? Would it be meaningful to ask them whether the book they read was any good? Would the outcome of this process be different if the participants were encouraged immediately upon burning their copy to make notes about their reading ex-

Mikko Eskelinen (architecture), Anna Nummi (costume design), Mike Pohjola (original world), Christopher Sandberg (original game design), Janne Björklund (photography) and many, many others. Älvdalen, Sweden.

1 I was not a Dragonbane organiser, but several months after the end of the game, I volunteered to help with the project's own evaluation process. That work has clarified my thinking on larp documentation and on Dragonbane itself. The report, forthcoming in 2008, will have a very practical focus. In the following I will share personal reflections provoked by the process and the game itself.

perience, or about the content and style of the novel?

This is the challenge that faces the role-playing community, and especially larpmakers: we are writing novels which dissolve upon completion. Issues of documentation are so complex that most larpmakers do not even attempt it. Another reason, of course, is that they typically have little time, energy or money left after an ambitious event.

Players, a potentially enormous resource in documentation, are difficult to re-involve after they have left the game area. And catching them at the end of the game has its own problems. In the liminal space between fiction and fact, players are typically busy either enjoying the lingering atmosphere of the fiction, or turning their fragmented game experience into a containable narrative. I suspect this nigh-universal need serves a very real function in reconstructing the player's private identity after a bout in a fictional role[1].

What happens in the moment or hours after a game is difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced it. We say goodbye to our characters, change into our real-world clothes, pack up, and give the organisers a hand in cleaning up – carrying something somewhere, wrapping things up. Some game-makers include a ritual act or goodbye at the end, either just inside the (temporal and/ or geographical) border of the fiction or just outside it. Productions designed to be emotionally very affecting or to make a political point tend to add post-game discussion of a more formal kind.

The after-larp party, traditional in many role-playing cultures, is a chance for players to get acquainted or re-acquainted as themselves (or as their new selves to the degree that the game experience has changed them). Other role-playing communities have no such formal traditions, and they are not strictly necessary precisely because of the players' innate ability to sort the game experience into the grander schemes of their lives.

We just need a moment to sort ourselves out, to pass judgement on our chapters and place them in the context of the collective experience. All larpers know the frustration of this: that listening to the subjective stories of other players is in fact almost never helpful or particularly interesting. We may want to hear some technical plot point to satisfy our curiosity, but intense scenes seldom translate into captivating stories.

So even though the need to linger has very much to do with our own story-experience, the element of evaluation almost invariably ends up being one of critical impressions. Did the physical reality of the game conform to expectations? Were we satisfyingly surprised by events as they unfolded? Did the atmosphere that emerged support our personal narratives?

We can usually tell even as the game unfolds whether it is more or less than we hoped for. But the personal game-narrative and the ghost ideal of the game as a whole are two completely different texts. To some degree, perhaps because of the collective nature of the form, we always attempt a collation of them after the fact. In some ways, the process of comparing experiences starts before the game has even started. Participants compare expectations before the event, in off-game moments during the game period, and in what can only be described as *off-game glances* – out-of-character reactions that are (willingly or unwittingly) communicated to other players while the game is in action.

Yes, a larp is always played with a first-person audience. But like any audience, the typical first person participant looks for the context for guidance. We adjust our interpretations to clues from our co-play-

1 It would perhaps be possible for the interested researcher to at least document that process – the "debriefing" or offloading narrative can arguably be told just as efficiently with a tape recorder present.

ers during the game – this is why it can be very jarring to meet another group of players mid-game, whose experiences of other larps and glancing decisions in this one have led them into another style of playing. Or into an entirely different genre of fiction.

It is worth reiterating that larpers of different cultures will share very few basic assumptions about what a larp is. Whether, for instance, alluding to off-game knowledge is acceptable. Whether we should use or camouflage the accents of our real-world voices. Whether it is the player or the character who engages with the plot, or makes a joke, or laughs at it. Multicultural gaming is a constant negotiation, and when the game has ended, our respective pieces of the puzzle do not necessarily fit together smoothly, or at all.

When the last participant leaves, the organisers are left in ruins: sometimes personally and financially, always in the physical, textual and critical debris of their original vision and the game that resulted. Few games are complete successes in every way. But what most players ultimately care most about is their personal experience of the over-all game narrative. Yet that is exactly the element of the game which in most difficult to lock down, let alone document. *Dragonbane* is a case in point. Regardless of its unique features, and the fact that a great part of the participants had a great time, it is widely considered to have been a failure.

Well, I was there as a player. My experience was appalling for a great while, mildly satisfying for the last few days and, at moments, absolutely amazing. I do understand those who felt cheated of their investments of time and effort. Players who were cold and wet and miserable for reasons that could have been avoided certainly have real cause for complaint. But the majority were none of those things.

I suspect that the dismissal of the game ultimately stems from the inability, outlined above, of the player collective to organise strongly differing narratives into a coherent whole. I suspect the players who really enjoyed the game felt hurt, or felt their experience threatened, by the negative voices. After the game, they preferred to talk to players who shared their own views, and although they posted positively on the game's web forums after the event, they largely refrained from entering into arguments with the loudly negative voices.

The ironic thing is this: many of the organizational failures of *Dragonbane* could have been avoided, if larpmakers were better at learning from each other. And the tragic thing is this: because of how the game has been dismissed, its successes too risk being lost to the tradition.

Shambles

Aside from a handful of volunteers previously on site, the players started arriving at the *Dragonbane* headquarters and check-in zone (know as the Boot Camp) in the week before the game. The last arrival dates were staggered to allow for preparation time with the organisers, but participants were encouraged to arrive early. Those that did were immediately roped into physical labour, since the village was far from finished. Organisers operating on very little sleep, drowning in work, were curt of tone, and there was a fair bit of grumbling amongst the players at what was perceived as a lack of gratitude for the work they were now putting in. There was also a very real sense that there was simply too much left to do before the beginning of the game. Finishing several buildings? Building an entire temple? Setting up an 80-person camp for the dragontamers and many small ones for the witches? How could that possibly be achieved in two days?

The participants put shoulder to the wheel, and a satisfying communality did emerge in the process. Even if it often took the form of collective griping, there was also solidarity with the common goal. Many individuals who had been only loosely connected with the game organisation stepped into leadership roles and mediated between the

practical needs of the project and the needs of the players. The first, semi-official game day was, in practice, sacrificed to finish setting up the camps, but all in all, tackling the immense practical challenges together involved quite a lot of fun.

My group, the witches, was the smallest in numbers and thus the lowest priority, and ended up losing almost another day of playing time to practical problems. Communication gaffes as to the equipment we would need exacerbated the situation, and when we finally got in-game, it was to a day and half of solid rain in poorly waterproofed tents. At that point some players had given up and left, and a few others left during the game, effectively sabotaging the plots of the remaining players. Yet here too, player solidarity saved the day, and the organisers did their utmost to compensate for our unfortunate situation. Witch players that did not despair and decided to bottle their frustration away until later generally had a reasonably good game. With a fair amount of justification, some of the same people were among the loudest critics of *Dragonbane* after the event.

It would have been bittersweet for the organisers (had their zombie-like exhaustion allowed for any reflection) to discern that it was the volunteer spirit of the player community that ultimately swung their way and made the game possible. A dearth of volunteers was what had originally created the desperate situation. As larp in the Nordic countries is a non-profit activity, the hundreds of *Dragonbane* team members had all worked for free, in some cases also choosing to work shorter hours in their professional careers to free time for the project. Many though they were, there would have been work for as many again.

Mentioning one name above the others in such a committed group is almost inappropriate. But *Dragonbane* was indisputably a product of the personality and passions of its originator and main organizer Timo Multamäki[1]. *Impossible* is not a concept he holds in high regard, and he is sometimes accused of megalomania. If that is what Multamäki suffers from, it is a particularly infectious strand: in all of his larp projects, most of which have been admired for their ambition and criticized for their artistic content, he has demonstrated an ability to convince large numbers of people to work toward the realization of his unlikely visions.

He demands the unwavering loyalty of people sharing his passions – a quality that is both positive and negative – and works with a recurring core group of skilled collaborators on special effects, technology and game design. They typically share his ability to work very hard for long periods of time on very little sleep. Yet an alarming number of *Dragonbane* team members broke down physically or mentally from the sheer workload of the project.

Of those that decided to quit before it got that bad, many did so through quietly dropping off the radar rather than stepping down and handing over their tasks in an orderly fashion. A small larp is typically organized through a series of in-person meetings, but the *Dragonbane* team was spread out over Europe and much of the interaction was web-based.

Very soon identifying and reassigning dropped tasks, and okaying completed ones, should have been a full-time job in itself. But as often happens in overstretched organizations, practical management especially on the middle levels was simply overlooked. As the dwindling number of remaining volunteers agreed to take on even more work to keep the project afloat, scant resources remained for the day-to day running of this complex, multinational project.

1 Full disclosure: I have known Timo Multamäki for over a decade. We have disagreed in the past over my criticisms of his work, and will in all likelihood disagree again in the future.

Especially after the original plans to host the game in Estonia were scrapped, it became evident that delivering the larp as on the planned date (summer of 2005) was impossible. A decision to move the game one year ahead was made, and although this was generally met with understanding from the players, it stretched the organization further.

It is certainly fair to say that Multamäki's authoritative and demanding managerial style generates conflict as well as loyalty. (It is equally fair to say that a great part of his bluntness, perceived by some as rude or shocking, is a cultural trait – a reflection of traditional Finnish communication styles).

It would seem that a dire lack of manpower would have been reasonable cause to cancel the production at this point. But here too, Multamäki's personality shone through. To him and the team around him, stopping was impossible – not because of the work already put into the project, nor indeed for the sake of any private ambitions, but because of loyalty and pride.

Dragonbane had applied for money as an international youth project, which of course it was, and for sponsorship as a unique cultural project, which it was too. Funding the half-million euro project[1] through volunteer work, external grants and sponsorship was an immense feat in itself. In the probably correct opinion of the *Dragonbane* team, cancelling at a point when those resources had already been committed to the production would have harmed the image and status of the larp hobby as a whole.

A more complex question is why the ambitions of the project were not scaled down when the problems became apparent. The organisers' reply would be that they were: the number of participants planned for was diminished, the building schemes in the game village Cinderhill rendered less ambitious, and many small plans that players had not even been told about abandoned.

The other, obvious reason was the game's continuing need to attract players and retain the ones already signed up. The vision the makers had touted was very specific and abandoning any central part of it would in all likelihood have led to player cancellations. Most importantly, the game had promised a dragon. In Finland, its design and construction continued at break-neck pace, with the dedicated team of builders and programmers running into a number of hurdles of their own.

As for the game site in Älvdalen, Sweden, the organisers had also had high hopes for players from the Swedish larp communities to spend time on building work in 2005 and 2006 against a substantive game discount. When such local help did not materialize to the expected degree, the majority of the building was undertaken by Finnish core organisers and, randomly, Spanish volunteers. Seeing how time-consuming this ultimately became, Multamäki has later observed that it would probably have been more efficient to use that time to raise even more money and just invest in professional builders to finish the work.

For the players arriving at the check-in area that last week in July, it seemed bizarre that the organization could provide, say, decorated lanterns for the witches, carved statues for the temple, and some wooden skis to hang on the walls of a Cinderhill longhouse (because surely Cinderhillians would ski in winter) – but not enough cars to transport the players to the game area on schedule. The players did not realize how much of the props had been produced in collaboration with Finnish and local arts-and-crafts schools, another admittedly ingenious example of the organisation's way of identifying untapped resources. But such resources could not at any point have

1 On top of actual costs, this figure includes the value of goods and services donated to the project. It includes the transportation cost of the dragon, but not the six-figure sum Multamäki scrounged up privately for its construction.



The website had an abundance of instructions and reference photos. Here an example picture of the witches' costumes. (Photo: Dragonbane project)

been transformed into middle management, transport or money.

In retrospect it is easy to see, that the addition of as few as three people working full-time on management, internal communication and coordination – *and nothing else* – could have made all the difference to the project at large. Having them on site as the players arrived, to coax instead of desperately demand their help, would certainly have affected the pre-game atmosphere constructively.

"In retrospect it is easy to see" – but we live our lives prospectively. Had those three people been available, they would almost certainly have spent the summer building the village, because that task seemed most vital at the time. It would have made a difference, of course, but not a real change. The problem was not one of naivety: many of the key *Dragonbane* operatives work with project management professionally, and know full well the importance of planning and overview.

I actually suspect that they brought the nightmare of the last frantic weeks upon themselves willingly. I suspect that they refused the bird's eye view because it might have told them the one thing they refused to accept – that, step by step, their goal, even in its reduced form, was impossible to reach. And because they did not accept that, they turned out to be right. The help they would have needed along the way materialised only at the last possible moment: the moment the players could see – and touch – what the game really had the potential of becoming.

A Thousand Words

The creative writing tasks involved in creating a Nordic Style larp can be summarized under the headings "world", "plot" and "character". Writing the world includes defining the fiction's physical reality, history, cultures and metaphysics. Writing plot involves setting up the conflicts and interactions projected to occur between character groups and individuals during the game. And writing "characters" involves specify-

ing as much detail about the fictional roles as the game design requires. Typically this involves deciding the relationship of the individual to the culture to which he belongs, specifying some biographical background and the events that have led the character to the moment at which the game begins, and defining the character's personal ambitions and relations to other characters.

In the Nordic scene, the world is typically written by the larpmakers, as is the plot, if it is relevant to the game's design and structure (it usually is). How character is handled reflects great differences between game cultures and even individual games. Sometimes the larpmakers will define only the characters necessary for the plot (such as "the king" or "the murderer") and allow the players to create characters within indicated culture groups as they please. At other times, when the characters are written by the larpmakers, the player is encouraged to fill in additional biographical and psychological information, as long as it is not in conflict with what has been previously written.

For *Dragonbane*, the world and some plot was provided by the larpwrights. Players were encouraged to create their own characters in collaboration with a "character coach" who would monitor and edit or approve the players' character entries in the game's online system, NEST. The system guided the player to answer a number of questions about the character, ranging from age and gender to, for instance, the main events in the character's life between ages 10 and 15. The material was then reviewed by the character coach, whose insight in the general game design ideally enabled him to make suggestions for changes likely to resonate with the themes of the game as a whole.

Such a system of character creation forces the player to think about his expectations for the game, and consider what types of situations he would want to explore through the narrative. It also encourages him to draw on private experience, to see the character as a complex biographical entity rather than just a symbolic subject. In some games, it is of course highly appropriate for player characters to be little more than shells or costumes. In others, emphasising psychological realism is very helpful indeed, but players can find it challenging to elaborate individualised life-narratives in completely generic environments.

Dragonbane's character creation process encouraged the players to engage actively with the idea of every-day life in Valenor, and enabled them to create intra-character relations and collaborate on common fictional memories regardless of geographical distance.

More Than Fantasy

The action of the larp was centred on the village of Cinderhill in the far north of the fantasy world of Valenor, created by Mike Pohjola for his roleplaying game *Myrskyn aika* and appropriated for game use in collaboration with the author. The three cultures represented in the game – the villagers, the dragontamers and the witches – were created afresh, with the game design in mind. The cultures' real differences in lifestyles, beliefs, social codes, dress and behaviours were geared specifically towards setting up social conflicts in which violence would not be the immediate solution.

The game events start a few days after a vast battle, in which the dragontamers have succeeded in killing one of the village's two dragon deities. The part played by the witches in this tragedy is unclear, as are indeed all the details of the conflict, since the magical energy released by the dragon's death has confused the memories and senses of everyone in this very magical environment.

The "you cannot remember the details" topos is a common and rather crude fix to a typical larp problem – that players purporting to have grown up together in an isolated village do not remember all their neighbours' names, let alone age-old cus-

toms – but it worked reasonably well here. The player's process of finding one's feet within the fiction paralleled the process of the magical befuddlement lifting from the character's minds.

Over the course of the game, the goal of the villagers was to convince the stronger and better-armed dragontamers that they had no need to be rescued from the remaining dragon. The dragontamers' goal was to decide whether their honour code about not harming humans should be interpreted in support of or in opposition to the villagers' wishes. And the witches needed to decide whether to trust an offer from an oppressive far-away emperor to stop anti-witch apartheid within his realm in exchange for the remaining dragon's heart, a powerful magical object.

Characters within the groups agreed with the collective goals to differing degrees, making many individual narratives reflect the positive effects of multiculturalism – that being confronted with alien values can make us challenge what we have previously accepted without question.

The dragontamers' culture was perhaps closest to traditional ideas of fantasy fighter-adventurers, except that the collective was gender blind (like all the cultures in the game). The witches, knit together in close units of two nigh-siamese magical collaborators, were conceptualised as very far from human in their priorities, habits and values. And Cinderhill operated as a sort of theocratic utopia, in which a peaceful collective was organised around service to an ideal – the dragon – that only upon consideration could be construed as a sort of implicit dictator.

A number of high-profile creatives from the Nordic larp scene were associated with *Dragonbane* in the project's early days. Whether because of creative or personal conflicts, or real-world demands on their time, keeping them on board proved difficult, relegating the status of writing tasks from a key creative element to a mere necessity. The work was moved around a great deal within the organization, which led to some confusion especially about who, exactly, had the final say about the specifics of the different in-game cultures. This proved problematic since one of *Dragonbane*'s experimental approaches included moving all design responsibility away from the players.

Architecture and design of each culture's abodes, clothes and equipment systematically reflected its belief system. They were distinct enough from each other to make it possible even at long distances to identify a person's group affiliation at first glance; up close it was immediately possible to deduce a whole deal about the stranger's lifestyle from his dress and equipment.

This coherence between the visual and the thematic was a major game design point: one of the challenges of the fantasy genre that the organisers had identified was the predictable manner in which players given free rein will always revert to the Tolkien/Warhammer/Dragonlance aesthetic.

To make a fictional culture truly plausible, they argued, it should evoke only that culture, instead of activating the players' memories of popular culture texts or other larps. This included not just architecture and set design, but also costume design and personal props ranging from sleeping equipment to cutlery. All artefacts were to reflect underlying traditions and values and become part of the game's conceptual, rather than just visual, design.

The approach proved very powerful, but the motivation is also a post facto rationalisation. The practical reason for centralising all design was the variation in standards of historical accuracy and attention to detail within the players' game cultures. In many places, for instance, pseudo-mediaeval outfits are worn with modern shoes; in others character costumes are signified through symbolic attributes rather than naturalistic representation. Keeping the players on a short leash was a way to avoid off-game conflicts as well as to serve the design of the in-game milieu.



The dragontamers arrive in Cinderhill. (Photo: Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

Cinderhill 360°

Detailed culture guides were produced for the players, but version control of the documents proved challenging, as responsibility for them moved around within the organisation. As the guides could not cover everything, a great number of questions were debated in the game's online forums, where players felt organisers sometimes gave them conflicting information. The closer the game drew, the more it seems decisions on design issues became divorced from the underlying game design principles. But the organisers offered no flexibility on the core issue of design ideology: that everything in the game should be constructed so that modern production elements (ranging from double seams to rubber soles) were completely invisible.

In the fundamentalist reading proposed by the organisers, all shoes, likely to suffer wear and tear, should include no modern elements that might be exposed over time, all fabrics should be at least 95% natural fibres and everything brought onto the game site itself, including spectacles and underwear, should be of a pseudo-medieval type and conform to the design standards provided by the organisers. A small off-game pouch was deemed acceptable, to be used primarily for medications.

Some players predictably grumbled, but the strict rules also became a selling point: *Dragonbane* would become the epitome of the larp aesthetic I have referred to as the 360° illusion (Koljonen 2007). In this aesthetic, the larp text is not produced in the minds of the players (or at least not primarily). It is experienced in their bodies and in the physical space of the game location, its geographical distances, the solidity of the set and props, and in the real-time logic of the game's temporal dimension (because time is central in producing physical effects, such as boredom or hunger).

Since simulation is dispensed with where practically possible, this aesthetic had not traditionally been applied to high-fantasy narratives. Arguably, the *Dragonbane* organisers entered an implicit contract with the players. In exchange for putting an uncommon effort into their props and cos-

tumes, the players would be rewarded not only with a hands-on, three-dimensional gaming environment, but also with the holy grail of 360° fantasy escapism: (seemingly) unsimulated magic, and a "real" dragon to interact with.

This effort, and this promise, were what made the breaches of the illusion especially jarring in this specific game. The problem was not that the larpers were not able to transform the disturbing elements to something else in the diegesis. At many other games the scarcity of these moments would have been an achievement. (But at many other games, the players would not have spent €100 on boots, or a week on some elaborate ritual garment they would only wear once). Regardless, the degree to which the illusion was maintained overall was astounding.

First, there is the matter of location. Älvdalen is a forested valley in Swedish Dalecarlia, with fairy book landscapes of the wild and rugged kind. Rather than sunny glades and lush hills, moss and pine-trees predominate, and players needed to be instructed to keep an eye out for bear and wolf. Mysterious ponds and cold forest lakes lay within the game area, as did a swamp that, to the witches' chagrin, was inevitably infested with mosquitoes.

Most impressively, the area was one plagued by forest fires, including one earlier that same summer. The terrifying grandeur of a newly burned forest is difficult to describe to one who has not seen it: the coal-black surfaces, the scorched stumps, the insistent patches of vibrant green were vegetation is starting the slow reconstruction process, the unreal nuances of night and blood that moss takes on when the earth it grows on is fried dry. What it looks like, most specifically, is like a place where a dragon was recently fought and killed.

The dry spell that had caused the blaze was also a problem for the production: exceeding care had to be taken with fire until the rains finally started. Unfortunately, this left an eyesore in the village, where the shell of one small building had been erected only for the express purpose of being burned down before the start of the game. On this assumption, building debris had been stocked in its exposed belly. When weather conditions made the burning impossible (and illegal), it had to be left intact.

The drought also provided organisers with opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to the illusion ideal. When the village well ran dry, a less ambitious team would have called a break in the game to solve the problem. At *Dragonbane*, it was arranged for the entire village to be performing a water ritual at a site further into the forest at the very moment a water truck drove in to refill the well – a spectacular way of generating functional magic through sheer logistics.

The villagers lived in longhouses, one of which was prioritised for families with young children. The children had dedicated minders creating age-appropriate game experiences for them, although they had to be trusted to be able to handle some intense moments such as the appearance of the dragon and interactions with threatening non-villager characters. One player, whose character was a masked blood witch, reported after the game that he had exposed his face at one point in an attempt to calm down a hysterical nine-year old, only to be rewarded with an eyeroll and the scathing remark that she was *in character*. Playing resumed without incident. Even to those who had no interaction with them, the children and animals of the village added immensely to atmosphere and realism. Especially when the sheep escaped and the overjoyed children chased after them, followed by a trail of growups scolding them for spooking the animals further.

Fantasy villages for larp purposes are often simple constructions with earth floors. That these buildings were designed to stand for 10-15 years added to the solidity of the illusion. It was possible to crawl in under them to listen to conversations inside; it was possible to hang things on the walls

and to climb up onto the roofs. The village had a bakery in which bread was baked all day; cooking happened at the fire-pits in the longhouses. There was a working smithy, and craftsmen such as carpenters were working on practically useful items for in-game use with period tools.

The village had two washhouses with big heated outdoor tubs, and two outhouses with rows of earth toilets facing each other in fine rural Nordic tradition. (One toilet was cordoned off with curtains for players who could not handle the communality, and for the privacy of women who had defied the instruction to make sure sanitary protection was historically appropriate). For legal reasons, it had not been possible to construct actual earth toilets. Instead, the plastic buckets beneath were emptied nightly by the temple adept players (or perhaps by their characters). This was in the interest of fairness, since temple adepts were exempt from the very real village chores that kept the other villagers busy all day.

The effect of the solid realism of physical props was at times stunning. One subplot centred on a big treasure chest. What sounds like a fantasy cliché was rendered enormously impressive by the sheer mass of the object, which required six men to lug around. Four great wrought-iron keys were required to open it, a literal fact, which incidentally demonstrated the need for flexible dramaturgy in a hyper-realistic setting.

In what could have become a big reveal, the Dragon demanded that the chest be opened as part of his ceremony in the village. Unfortunately, one of the keys was at that moment in a tent in the witches' camp, fifteen minutes' trek away under optimal conditions and rather more in the middle of the night. The witch ran, but the wait became intolerable, and the restless dragon yielded – the thought did cross at least my mind that at a larp with a less solid props with less functional locks, someone would have stepped up at that moment and opened the chest "by magic".

As typically happens in multi-day village games, a feeling of community developed in Cinderhill. The depth and nature of such communal feeling is obviously impossible to measure. My guess is that it emerges as another instance of life-size psychological simulation – the player choosing to interpret his increasing trust in the co-players as the character's trust in his community. If that is the case, shared experiences are likely to contribute strongly to the feeling's emergence.

The culture of Cinderhill involved many kinds of collaborative doing, ranging from morning tai chi, over music, dance and religious ritual, to physical labour. Even when they happened just once during the game these events were understood to represent recurring activities. They probably made it easier to project a shared feeling of common history than if the villagers had been – as otherwise often happens in the genre – sitting around in an inn, stiltedly reminiscing about unshared pasts, waiting for something to happen.

In *Dragonbane* this feeling of community was also necessary from a game design perspective. The village had to turn into an almost cultishly committed utopia, since the cathartic twist at the end was the dragon setting his followers free – telling them that though they had been his children, it was now time to grow up. But almost all village narratives, in any games, no matter how trivial, involve interaction as a collective against a perceived threat of some kind (symbolic or actual, internal or external).

Acting truly collectively (rather than as a group of strongly individuated characters in physical proximity to each other) is likely to slightly lower the relative importance of the single player's choices in any given situation. Collective actions also deflect focus from the individual, and most players – not only those with a pathological need for attention – do have a need to be seen and validated as they are playing.

Since the character is not as fully actualised a subject as most of our every-day roles, its

limits and nature need to be confirmed through action and interaction. Sneaking off on a private adventure is an easy way to enhance the player's feeling of immersion. Of course, players can make collective scenes more intense by working at keeping part of their focus on each other and not only on whatever the collective is opposing.

But it should be just as possible to systematically help define the borders of the character subject through a strong identification with an institution, a collective or indeed a physical environment.[1] That is how I believe the physical environment and culture of Cinderhill helped create a game environment in which staying still was just as satisfying as showing off.

Working Magic

One of the key challenges to creating larp magic that does not feel simulated is that of how to communicate extra-textual information between two players – basically the cause and effect of magic – without either of them needing to step out of character to process it. (This, I would argue, is required by all kinds of statistical systems). In *Dragonbane*, this challenge was beautifully solved by making all magic a speech act, identifiable by a code word – in this case *veritas*, latin for truth.

For all characters that could work magic, a much greater part of the game experience was focused on the working part than the magic part. Valenor was understood to be a world in which magical energy was available to anyone with the talent and diligence to use it, but exactly how to channel it was determined by culture, not any kind of natural law. Witches could only work magic in pairs highly attuned to each other and the highly specialised element with which they were most in resonance ("moss and lichen", for instance). Creating, designing and preparing a simple potion or spell was a painstaking process, but it was left to the players to decide exactly what that would entail. In Cinderhill, magic was religious and controlled by an institution, but the process of making the scrolls in which spells were encased was at least as complex as that of the witches' magic.

The game rules only set two limits on magic. One was the rule of its effect and duration, defined at 1:1. A magic user working for six hours in game-time on a spell (an eternity to be mumbling over a cauldron, no matter how deep your immersion into character) could create six hours of magic – for instance a mind control spell of that duration. But if the effect was shared among many, the time would be proportionately shorter, so that controlling six people would only be possible for one hour. The other was a function of how the magic was communicated – verbally – which limited the range of a spell to targets within hearing distance.

Players were allowed to design their characters' magic-doing freely, but were also encouraged to be fairly dramatic – to involve gestures, props, and special effects. The only instruction was, that just before the exact moment of the spell being attempted – the moment when the scroll was torn or the potion poured into the circle or the talisman placed on a person – the channelling speech act would be performed. It should start with the codeword "veritas" and include a concise description of the effect and the duration of the spell. A simple example could be "veritas – truly you will not speak of seeing us here until the sun rises". Crucially, this utterance contains a player instruction, but it is not a player instruction. It is an act of fictional magic because the words are only uttered when the player *and* the character have loaded

1 In the real world, ironically, such over-identification tends to be viewed as pathological; in larps it is arguably the opposite, since leaving the fictional group or environment at the end of the game is likely to automatically unravel the fictional personality, aiding the process of return to one's every-day roles.



The dragon transport. (Photo: Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

them with meaning. According to the rules, every veritas-spell should be obeyed without question.

If it seems unrealistic that a word could have such power even in a fictional world, consider the effect of suddenly yelling "look out!" at a stranger in ours. The words will have a physical effect almost completely independent from normal strategies of interpretation, and we have a very strong cultural taboo against uttering them when no danger threatens. This could be conceptualised as social magic: we have culturally agreed, for our own safety, to allow other people a certain amount of "mind control" over us in very specific situations.

In Valenor, "veritas" functioned much like that – except for the fact that it channelled supernatural powers in addition to social ones.

Since the words of the instruction sentence are what literally effect the magic, they also become the key to the spell's success. If the other player does not understand the instruction, he cannot obey it; if it is unclear, the effect will be unpredictable. Formulating and memorising the veritas phrase for each spell thus became a key part in its creation. A magic system like this is obviously primarily based on trust; only adults could play magic users and in the Nordic larp scene there is no overall tradition of policing players. Besides, the effort involved and the difficulty of forming a complex task into a simple instruction makes this magic very difficult to exploit. A very specific spell is most useful in a very specific situation, and predicting the exact situation in which the spell was to be used proved maddeningly difficult.

Social magic obviously has very little effect on inanimate objects, and does not look very impressive. The special effects team equipped magic users with things like glow-in-the-dark potions, powders that burned with flames in a range of colours, and liquids that, when mixed together and agitated, would dramatically change colour between black and white, or between the different colours of the spectrum – effects that when demonstrated at the boot camp, frankly felt like magic to the players too.

Among the chemical effects were also strong scents, an easy and underused resource in game design. Witches could lace their potions and ritual spaces with seductive or repulsive odours, creating an immediate physical response in nearby players. The swamp witch players heroically acclimatised themselves to a retch-inducing stink by dripping it on their clothes, making their presence distinctly unpleasant to all other players – generating a non-stop cavalcade of dramatic and entertaining scenes.

Players used special effects both to enhance their own playing experience as they created magic, and to make the performance of the magic itself more dramatic. Unfortunately, the most impressive effects required perfectly clean mixing bowls and ingredients that needed to be stored in plastic bottles. Because of a communications breakdown almost all witch players arrived at the game without mediaeval-looking vials, bowls or gloves. This made it impractical to make use of some of the chemical magic. Some players also chose to forgo all special effects that involved off-game tools, on the principle that they were in conflict with the aesthetic premise of the game.

Special effects were also provided by the organisers during the game. Terrifying sounds were heard in the night, fireworks and explosions simulating the dragon's pain. Waters started to fume and bubble. Ritual was punctuated by lights and thunder. Had the dragon itself been available during the game, it would have been possible to call it by performing a ritual at a specific place. And at the moment of the dragon's death, an astounding pyrotechnical extravaganza erupted – including two pillars of fire rising to twice the height of the temple. The moment was hugely impressive, but some players were startled or scared out of character; they did not know, or remember, that most of the flames employed by the f/x team were not hot enough to burn a person through her clothes.

Impressive though they were, many non-player effects suffered from the players' inability to decode them. Unlike the magic users' effects, it was not immediately obvious what they were meant to symbolise. A mystical burbling at the pond could at least be interpreted as a general ill omen, but explosions in the night prompted further investigation. If a player sneaking up to spy on the ruckus only sees pyrotechnicians in orange coveralls, the visual information prompts an off-game conundrum. Do they represent the dragon? Fire demons perhaps? Or are they completely invisible? But if so, does the fire shoot up from the earth for no apparent cause?[1]

Sometimes the organisers' commitment to deliver the coolest possible game turned against itself, as when the dragontamers, having performed a moving ceremony for their fallen, were discreetly instructed to repeat it the following day to be able to experience it with the proper effects. The organisers simply had no time to stop and realise what a powerful thing the environment was in and of itself: the players, sucked into the fiction, had certainly not felt anything lacking in the first ritual.

The Least of It

The last evening of the game would be the culmination of dragontide, with the creature expected to appear to its followers. I can hardly have been the only player to feel curious and a little bit excited at the spectacle. As a game nears its end, players often start to pay attention to the temporal limitation on their narratives, because the time

1 The special effects team could have moved through the forest invisibly in camouflage with night vision equipment. The choice to clearly signal the off-game nature of their presence was assumed to reassure the players. Unfortunately this further dissuaded players intent on staying within the fiction from asking them how to interpret the effects.



The Cinderhillians dance around Red near the end of the game. (Photo: Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

they have to conclude their personal plot in a satisfying manner is running out.

Many fantasy larps end with a great battle; this one had started just after one, and the main action centred on avoiding another one. Adding to the tension, the dragontamers, still not convinced, had spent quite some time building a giant ballista and dragging it close to the village. The characters – all of whom had seen dragons before – had visions in their minds of what to expect. The players, on the other hand, had to construct this vision for them, and the sources ran as much to technical specifications as to mythical beasts.

This is what we knew about the dragon called Red. Red was constructed by an international team of volunteers at building locations in Loimaa and Turku, Finland. Its body was built around a Ponsse S 15 harvesting machine – this was a dragon with off road capabilities – sculpted, given a latex skin and painted. It moved on wheels, which should not be very visible, given the movement of the front and back paws in front of them. Its pneumatic and hydraulic muscles allowed it mobility not only in the limbs but also the head, allowing facial expressions.

It would speak with an unearthly voice and "hear" speakers through microphones on its front. To simulate the sense of touch, 14 tiny cameras would be fitted on the body, allowing the operator to see in all directions, respond to threats and attacks, and make sure nobody got run over. Inside the torso, there was a control room with space for a driver and an actor. The dragon was not expected to spread its wings, but it was expected to breathe flames.

From reports and rumours at the beginning of the game we also knew there was now some kind of problem: the dragon was late. The witches, having the most up-to-date information on account of joining the game last, already knew the dragon would not have full capabilities. The dragon's neck had broken at the first transport attempt. Later a hydraulic pipe had burst, and there was no time to fix the problem. Before the last day of the game, witches and dragontamers were discreetly told that we would not be able to attack the dragon physically – it would just not be safe.

We were all gathered in the village at dusk, in tense expectation, and could hear the dragon approaching up the road long before it was in view. Its sound system certainly worked – crucially, since the engine sound was also audible. The thing was enormous, 26 meters long, its weight several tonnes. But it didn't have wings at all, which made its torso look comically bald and elongated. Its feet were hiked up and immobile, and saddest of all, its head was still too, stuck at the end of the stiff neck at an unnatural angle. The face had no mobility. When the dragon spoke, the eyes did not move – nothing did – and there was no fire in its mouth. Not even the tiniest whiff of smoke.

Nobody laughed, or reacted in any obvious manner, but it was like everyone's shoulders slumped at once. The scenes with the dragon signified the culmination of almost every plot in the game, and making the most of them was in everyone's interest. After a collective breath, we all just went on with it, interacting with the dragon as though it was not obviously a machine, but a living being, a deity, and a co-player. And at certain angles, especially as the sun went down, it was not too bad. With the light of bonfires playing on its skin, it sometimes seemed to shift or squirm. And there was a reason it looked pained, after all: it soon told us it was dying.

Then the dragon gave out a heartrending shriek, and the sky exploded, and the pillars of fire shot up behind the temple, and it died. And curiously, at that moment Red became real. When it was not expected to move, its clunky motion could not distract us. The odd angle of the head looked like the twisted position of one who has died in pain. And its skin, when we rushed in wailing towards it, felt slightly warm to the touch – although this might have been my imagination.

A life-size dragon that can see, move and speak is not an achievement to be scoffed at. Building it cost a fortune, and involved specialist knowledge in fields as diverse as creature design, welding, hydraulics, and programming. It also required the persuasive powers of Timo Multamäki, who may well be the only person in the world to be able to talk an industrial company into sponsoring an arts project with a timber harvesting machine.

The *Dragonbane* team delivered something completely astounding, and it is typical of their perseverance that not even the dragon's neck buckling and brakes giving up at a point where most of the builders had been up working for far more than 24 hours straight could stop them from getting the thing back together, across an ocean and into a far-away forested valley on time.

Criticism and Documentation

A larp does not exist until it is over, but at the moment it ends, it dissolves. The readers are left with fragments, and start working them into a narrative, but that narrative is corrupted and complicated by other intruding questions, not to mention the intruding answers of others. Was it any good? What was it about? Did we get what we wished for? What did we learn about larps?

The last question is perhaps the easiest to answer. As even this relatively limited essay has demonstrated, documenting what was attempted, how the organisers went about it, and how some players read those attempts is not impossible. Because of the complexities of the central tasks, and the enormous amount of external financing, the *Dragonbane* team needed early on to record, transmit and share detailed plans both within the organisation and outside it.

To guarantee a record of the event for non-participant collaborators, a team of photographers were working the area. They were in camouflage, and moved discreetly, but in the stillness of the forest they were inevitably a distraction. The material is obviously a closer record of in-game events than larp photos from games in which representation is symbolic could ever be. But the question of where the events really unfold remains. Is the text of the larp in the players' minds or in the physical space between then? My in-game memories look more "real" than the actual pictures – would that still have been the case if the 360° illusion had been achieved and maintained?

Consider for a moment that book club again. What if the members go to their meeting without realising that some of them have read chapters from a completely different novel, that just happens to have the same title? The ghost text emerges skewed and broken. Some players have hated the game, others have loved it, and none of them can be objectively wrong. The irreconcilable nature of their in-character

and game-participation narratives makes the game appear flawed in its design. (Sometimes this happens because it is).

And if we can agree on the primacy of a text – whether constructed from many subjective narratives, reconciled or not, or somehow read in the collective – would there be a point in archiving it? I would argue yes. In fact I think we should attempt it even if a text cannot be localised. We do not yet know what we will later need – theatre and dance historians have grappled with this issue since their disciplines were founded. Most of them do agree that a film of a performance is not a record of the experience of a performance, but they would also sacrifice a limb for a film of a Nijinsky choreography.

You could argue that this is completely different. A powerful dance performance could still be recreated, while a larp, played again, will end up a completely different text. On the other hand that is interesting too: a comparable variant text could be explored if all the elements leading up to the beginning of the game can be recreated. For instance, all the *Dragonbane* character descriptions exist in the NEST database. But they were created by and for specific players because that was deemed to serve the purpose of the game, and it is questionable whether another player's interpretation would be interesting or just derivative. But someday we might want to try.

So far, the process of multiplying performances of single larps has primarily been of interest to those who would conceive of them as products or education. But artistically oriented larpmakers are also awaking to the realisation that influential works from the beginnings of their careers are disappearing. We may already have lost canonical Nordic games like *Kybergenesis, Knappnålshuvudet*, and *Carolus Rex* – and that is a loss to a global larp community, because works like those are part of the foundation of how we think about role-playing today.

What exists of *Dragonbane* in February 2008? A village in Älvdalen, an almost functional dragon, a big batch of news clippings, over 3000 photos, ten hours of video, over 2000 props, 3GB of text, data and other material. A school in Åsen – the Boot Camp – that some dream of converting into a national centre for excellence in roleplaying. €75000 debt, of which €60000 are to Multamäki or his company[1]. The fast-fading memories, experiences and insights of over three hundred players, who also have, somewhere, costumes and equipment of which some may find new use in other larps later on. A digital trace of discussion and criticism in role-playing forums on the internet, which will survive for a long time, but not indefinitely.

What should be retained from *Dragonbane*? I can only answer to what impressed me. The focus on the body, the solidity of the fiction, the huge potential of both simple and complex special effects to create atmosphere and realise the supernatural. The fact that large-scale fantasy larps for grownups can work. Family larping. The enormous impact of centralised visual design on the game design as a whole. The challenges of gaming with players from differing cultures. The charm of feeling an absolute trust for co-players from all over Europe.[2]

And at last, at least: that it is possible for a bunch of dedicated enthusiasts to build a dragon. Red very nearly worked, and it still exists. Even if it never used in a game again, it stands as a symbol for the dreams that we reach for.

1 According to his estimate.

2 The game was played primarily in English. However, it was decreed that in Valenor, language (because of its magical connections) is an individual property just like eye colour or height. "Characters" that happened to be born with for instance German would sometimes speak it amongst themselves.

Ludography

Carolus Rex (1999): Martin Eriksson, Thomas Walch et al. A larp played in Sweden.

Dragonbane (2006): Timo Multamäki and others. A larp played in Älvdalen, Sweden.

Knappnålshuvudet (1998): Daniel Krauklis, Susanne Gräslund et al. A larp played in Sweden. Eng. "The Head of a Pin".

Kybergenesis (1997): Eirik Fatland et al. A larp played in Norway.

Myrskyn aika (2003): Mike Pohjola. Juva, Johnny Kniga. Eng. "The Age of the Storm".

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Mad about the Boy

Three years have passed since we wrote this text for Do Larp*, the book of larp documentation blueprints published for Knudepunkt 2011. We had reservations about the blueprint format. What we wanted to write was a proper "manuscript", documenting all parts of the process to make it a truly rerunnable larp.*

Nevertheless, it has been run twice without any original larpwrights present, in the Netherlands and Finland. We have also run the larp three more times after the original Norwegian run, once in the USA and twice in Sweden. We've learned a bit from each of these runs that we didn't know when writing this. One of the most important lessons came from the Netherlands. The Dutch ran the larp without transparency or workshops. Thus "&Eva" (the Dutch title) turned out to be a more traditional larp than we envisioned. Without these key design elements the larp moved into a different genre than what we designed.

Thus, from now on if you want to run the larp we would set as a criteria that you to do it in accordance with the design principles described in this text and our website. You also need to contact us before announcing a run of the larp to get a clear green light to use our material.

The larp was originally written for a Nordic context, but as any culture can relate to catastrophes of life-altering proportions we believe that with only small role adjustments it should fit many places. The workshops will be important in all settings to align the vision with all participants.

We've seen the larp spark loads of meta-discussions every time it is run, both before and after the game. This can be both constructive and destructive and should be monitored and handled carefully.

— Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindhal & Margrete Raaum

Mad about the Boy is a larp about survivors of a global disaster that killed more than half of humanity. An inexplicable disease killed all the men in mere minutes. The surviving women are facing not only the enormous task of rebuilding society, but also the possible extinction of humanity.

Introduction

The world of the larp is inspired by the graphic novel *Y the Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughn and Pia Guerra. The larp does not use any characters or storylines from the graphic novel.[1]

Our story is about a group of women who have applied to an insemination program initiated three years after the disaster. As sperm has become a very precious resource, there are only a few women who will be given this privilege.

The first act of the larp centers around the selection of who will get to enter the program to become mothers, and what new family structures will be the best ones to raise these precious children. Act one of the larp ends with a man entering - the only one who has survived the catastrophe. How will each woman relate to this man? Before the end of the second and final act the women will have to decide what to do with him.

A larp about a world without men will of course have gender as one of it's main themes. What happens when "mankind" has become "womankind"? What does a world where women have to fill all positions and roles in society look like?

The original larp was played twice in the summer of 2010. Each run lasted three days, divided into one day of workshops, one and a half day of playing and an evening of debriefing.

The game was written and played in English to make it possible for non-Scandinavians to participate. We wanted to explore both an all-female game and a game where men could play female characters[2].

Design Decisions

Our larp was divided into three parts; a workshop and two acts. The two acts are separated by the event of the man entering the scene. The first act is more strictly defined than act two. It is focused around the selection process for the maternity program. Act two is hardly scripted at all. It is left open whether the characters decide to continue the selection process, overthrow the committee or whatever else the players decide to do with the story.

The only instruction we gave the players for act two is that it should be the choice of the women, either collectively or through some of them winning a power struggle, what the fate of the last man will be. He can try to influence what will happen through his interaction with them, but not completely override what is happening by for

1 The only exception is the character of Linn whose background is inspired by one of the characters from the comic.

2 Some reactions and comments from players of the game can be found here: http://laivforum.net/threads/18990-Mad-about-the-Boy



The first act ends with the arrival of the last man in the world. (Photo: Li Xin)

instance fleeing right before the last scene of the larp. Hopefully the character of Isak will also strike up different type of relationships hostile and friendly with the different female characters, so that he doesn't focus his play on one particular alliance or love story.

We chose to do all the preparations on site. In principle the only preparations the players needed to do were reading through their characters and bringing a suitable costume. We believe that you get more focused and coherent preparations when everything is done with all of the players present, immediately before the larp starts. By and large this worked very well. Some of the players chose to prepare more than this before the larp and this was possible as the characters were sent out in advance.

All characters were pre-written for two reasons. It enabled us to get a well balanced dynamic between the characters. The other reason was that we wanted the players to to have very limited preparations before arriving at the larp. We developed a character template which was divided into sections like 'archtype' and 'suggested function for the character in the dramaturgy of the larp' to clearly communicate the playability of the character.

For this larp we were interested in exploring stories, inner lives and backgrounds of the women.

We find that meta techniques is a way to bring important aspects of the game into actual play between characters, so that important dramatic elements don't just remain in character descriptions or individual players' heads. The meta techniques we used are presented in more detail later in this blueprint.

We also decided on a great deal of transparency concerning the story. We believe we gain better play by telling our players what to expect and what we need from them to make our story come true. The framework for the larp is open information for everyone, so that the true surprises come from what the players fill this with. Because of this, we told the players that a man would show up and when that would happen. We wanted the reactions of the characters, not the players. We also published all the characters so all the players could read them.

As all characters in this game except one are female, if playing this with both male and female players we recommend having a particular focus in the workshop on the role playing challenges faced by male players playing female characters. We did this through physical workshops on female body language.

The Setting of the Game

The death of men happened very quickly and without warning. It is still not known what caused their deaths. Sperm is stored in sperm banks many places in the world, but governments have been reluctant to make use of it since tests indicate that only girl children could be born.

The Nordic governments have recently decided to use some of the sperm in a pilot programme, the one the characters of the larp have applied to. A committee has been appointed by the government to make the final selection of who will be accepted into the programme.

The leader of the committee, Maria the politician, is the ideological brain behind the programme. As the death of men is also



A character playing a scene in the black box. (Photo: Li Xin)

the death of the nuclear family, Maria has decided that the recommended family unit for the insemination programme should be three women.

According to Maria this is a more robust constellation than the old one. Most of the other characters then arrive in groups of three, but the ties that bind the women together are different from trio to trio. When the larp begins they are all gathered at a secluded place where the final selection will take place.

Characters

Below is a short presentation of the characters divided into groups. There are 29 written characters. With fewer players, one or more of the trios can be removed from the game. In some of the trios it is decided who is the intended birth mother, in others this might be open for discussion and conflict.

Complete character texts as well as further description of the world after the disaster can be downloaded from http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org.

The Groups

The Committee has been selected to choose the women who will get to raise a child in this first part of the new Nordic insemination program. In the first act they will organize a selection process, including interviews and tests of the applicants.

The Survivalists are a group of women belonging to a community which strives to be as self sufficient as possible. They are skeptical to the ability of the state to manage things in these present circumstances but go along with the programme to secure a child for their community.

The Artists are three women who are used to either taking the spotlight, or making sure they have a say in who is in it. Their plan is to document the conception, birth and childhood of a human being born into this world. It will be beautiful. Truly a work of art.

The Lovers are a polyamorous group of three and a fixture of the scene in the city offering art and entertainment in these hard times. Even though they can be a close knit unit they are three women who are not shy to occasionally let their personalities and temperaments clash in public.

The Wealthy Women. The heiress of a fishery empire, the entrepreneur and the housewife. Together they are a resourceful family unit wealthy enough to provide for all the needs of a child.

The Professionals. Who can be more qualified to raise a child then a psychiatrist, a teacher and a social worker? These three women are not a family and more acquaintances than friends really.

The Nuclear Family. This is the family that in the strongest sense resembles a family like they used to be: a mother, a father and a grandmother, only the prospective father is a drag king. The young woman in this group has a history of being treated badly by men in her life before they all died.

The Muslim Sisterhood. A common faith bind these otherwise very different women together. Compared to many secular women their faith might help them make sense of life after the disaster. The downside is that if they lose the belief that there is a meaning to the suffering, the existential crisis might become ever so much deeper.

Three Generations. The women left in this family are the dominating grandmother, her haunted daughter-in-law and the teen-

age granddaughter. Theirs is not a harmonious relationship, but they already have a family structure, and know each others faults and fortes.

Linn is not part of a trio and is a wild card in the selection process. She is a survivor, a person who is honest with herself, a no-nonsense, practical woman. Formerly a page 3 girl, she's now an undertaker, a scavenger and somewhat of an action girl.

Isak is the last man on Earth. Feeling like a lone sailor caught in a storm at sea. He has been hiding in the forest alone during the three years which has passed since the disaster, he was recently captured by a gang of women planning to profit from him. He managed to escape and has run naked through the forest for hours when he comes crashing into the game at the end of act one.

Act 1

The larp begins three years after the disaster to the day. The Song 'Mad about the Boy' plays while the participants have gathered in a circle with their eyes closed. When the song ends the larp begins. The committee and all of the applicants are gathered in a circle for a ceremony of remembrance. They are each holding a candle. One by one they tell where they were and what happened around them when the disaster struck. When one is finished speaking she blows out her candle. When everyone has spoken and blown out their candle the ceremony is over. Maria then holds a welcome speech, talking about the insemination programme.

During the rest of the day the committee will organize interviews and tests of all the applicants. Theresa is in charge of the psychological tests, while Julie is in charge of physical tests. The tests can both be individual (of prospective birth mothers for instance) or group tests of each prospective family. When not involved in the test the applicants will get a chance to get to know the other women who are gathered here and maybe establish possible alliances or animosities.

Shortly before the organizers have decided to end act one the committee should gather everyone to present their preliminary recommendations for who will get access to sperm and who will not. It is up to the committee themselves how many they choose, but approximately half of the family groups can work well. The committee is also free to recommend a rearranging of the family groups and/or to make a separate list of the most suited birth mothers separate from the list of the best suited family groups.

When the committee has concluded the presentation the characters are given a brief moment for initial reactions, Isak, the last man, comes crashing in the door, fleeing into a house he thought was empty. Everyone freezes and 'Mad about the Boy' is played. When the song has ended one of the organizers ask each character (except Isak) one by one "[Name] What runs through your head?", and they answer with a brief monologue. When everyone has spoken 'Mad about the Boy' is played again. When the song ends act 2 begins. In the original production of this larp, act one lasted from early afternoon to approximately midday the next day.

Act 2

Act 2 begins right where act one ended – with all the women gathered moments after Isak came crashing into the room. Some of the characters will most probably try to take charge of the situation, but what unfolds now is wholly up to the characters themselves. The players make the decisions as to whether the selection process for the insemination programme should continue in parallel with the storyline of what to do with the last man.

Act 2 should last until sometime in the evening the same day. Some of the characters might decide to contact the outside world. This should be somewhat difficult and can be explained with phone lines and

cellphone networks being down. If someone has a phone conversation with someone from the outside this can be played out in the black box, with one of the organizers playing the person on the other end.

The larp ends with a scene that in some way or other determines what happens to Isak. How this plays out should be up to the participants themselves. It could be a joint decision or some of the characters forcing through the outcome. Towards the end the organizers should be watching the drama unfold and be alert to what is to be the last scene of the larp.

When they decide that this is it, they should play 'Mad about the Boy' one last time. Everyone gathers in a circle while the song is playing and removes an item belonging to the character putting it on the floor as a way of saying goodbye to the character and to the larp. When the song ends everyone is out of character and the game has ended. We had a portable mp3-player, so the larp could end anywhere on the premises.

Meta-Techniques

This larp incorporates the use of some meta-techniques and some simulating game mechanics that can be employed by the participants. Meta-techniques are dramaturgical game mechanics that seek to enable play which isn't possible with a purely "realistic" playing style. The aim is thus to strengthen the drama of the larp, by pulling what is inside the characters head into real game situations. Here is an overview of the recommended techniques for this game.

Inner Voice

With this technique an organizer approaches a character who is currently not in the company of others. The organizers start playing the character's inner voice which the character responds to. Typical input can be giving voice to the character's fears and doubts or encouraging the character to act on a personal motivation. When the organizer walks away from the character the inner voice session is over. Several players reported that they had acted out things because of being exposed to this technique that they otherwise wouldn't have. A few people found it disturbing, but then the organizer should just back off.



The game is frozen during the break between acts 1 and 2. (Photo: Li Xin)

Monologue Box

The monologue box is a technique where the inner thoughts of the character are spoken aloud. This is heard by the players, but not by the characters they play. What they hear in a monologue can be used in how they will play in relation to that character, but the characters should react in the situation according to not having heard what was said in the monologue. The start of a monologue is signaled by drawing a square box in the air with both hands in front of the face before speaking. When the monologue is finished the same sign is made and regular play resumes.

The monologue box is best used in scenes with few characters where everyone can clearly see the monologue sign being made. We experienced some misunderstandings on the part of the players when this technique was used in crowded scenes. In the second run it was suddenly used for communicating off-larp issues, stop this if it happens as this will create confusion.

Black Box

A room at the game site can be designated as a black box. The black box can be used to play scenes from the past, imaginary scenes and possible futures. An organizer can be present in the black box and give input and suggestions as a director to the scenes that the participants want to experience.



Some women tried to run off with the man (Photo: Susanne Wehner)



The Committee and the last man. (Photo: Susanne Wehner)

The black box is also well suited to play scenes of contact with the outside world (if the Committee contacts the government for instance). It can also be used by participants who want to have an off-game discussion about where the story about their characters is heading and agree on scenes they want to play out during the game. The black box can contain light and sound equipment to be used to enhance scenes, but this is not essential. The "black box" can be any designated room or area on the game location where the participants can play out scenes without being disturbed by things happening outside while they are in the black box.

Ars Amandi

Ars amandi is a technique developed by Swedish game designer Emma Wieslander to simulate sexual scenes in larps. When employing ars amandi a sexual encounter is played out by touching each others hands, arms and shoulders while keeping eye contact with the other person(s) in the scene. No other parts of the body is touched. We found this method well suited for any sexual scenes that might happen in this game. We recommend that ars amandi is demonstrated in a pre-game workshop to ensure that the participants who might play sexual scenes become comfortable with it and everyone at the larp get the same understanding of how it is to be played out.



Characters from The Nuclear Family. (Photo: Li Xin)

Simulated Violence

This is not a game with a lot of expected scenes of violence, but some of the characters have been given guns to make violence into a clear and present threat. The main reason we added guns to the game was that they represent the explicit possibility of not resolving conflicts in a peaceful manner. In particular we wanted that aspect included in a game with a majority of or only female players to see if and how the guns were used.

The players should be instructed that firing a gun should not be done before towards the end of the game. The character shot at decides whether she dies or is just wounded. Physical confrontations without



Dismay among some of the applicants to the fertility programme as the Committee presents their recommendations. (Photo: Li Xin)

guns involved, such as punching someone, should be played out safely. We chose to do this in a slow motion mode, but this did not really work well in high adrenaline situations. Situations were played out safely, but the slow-mo part was just forgotten.

Pre-Game Workshop – Some Suggestions

We wanted the pre-game workshop to be an integrated part of the entire experience of playing Mad about the Boy. Building the flow of the workshop, we wanted to work with the players starting with focusing on themselves and their reasons for joining the game, to reflecting on the game world and finally to become the character they would play through workshops on body language and playing out scenes as the character. Here is a sketch of the main points covered by the workshop:

Day 1

1) Organizers present themselves, the structure of the workshop and the two acts of the game.

2) Players introduce themselves and their motivation for wanting to play this larp.

3) The players are introduced to the in-game world through a guided meditation asking the players to imagine what their own reality would be like if all men suddenly died.

4) A physical workshops with focus on female body language. How are women's body language different from men's? How are "masculine" and "feminine" women's body language different from each other; and women of different status.

5) The players present the characters they will play. The players then fill in application forms for the insemination programme as their characters.

6) Joint world building through discussing what the world after the disaster looks like in areas like: art & culture, media, education, sexuality

& romance and religion & ideological movements.

Day 2

7) Hot seat is a theatre impro technique where one player at a time is interviewed in character by a couple of other participants. They ask questions about the past and present life of the character and all answers are improvised on the spot. This enables a player to deepen the knowledge of the character she will play before the game itself starts.

8) A physical workshop with focus on finding the individual character's body language. This was particularly important in the game which included male participants, but can be a relevant exercise for almost any larp - finding how the character moves in a different way from the person's regular body language.

9) An introduction on how to use the ars amandi technique in the game. Everyone who have characters who are in an intimate relationship with each other can be encouraged to play out a situation using ars amandi.

10) Explanation and demonstration of the other meta techniques previously described.

11) Split into groups and act out scenes from the past of the characters. This can be scenes between characters who are in the game as well as scenes with other characters, for instance men who are now dead. Suggestions for scenes can be found in the manuscript on our website.

Mad about the boy

Designed and organized by: Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl, Margrete Raaum

First played on June 28th - July 1st, 2010 in Trysil, Norway.

Duration: 48 hours

Number of players: 23

Budget: 6.300 € (participation fee: 63 €) for two runs of the game

More information: http://mad-about-the-boy-larp.blogspot.no

Concluding Remarks

This larp was made as a collaborative project between three organizers. We jointly created the setting and the characters and did a lot of our writing together to ensure consistency and to motivate each other and avoid the feeling of "homework". Thanks to our players for making our vision come through, and we hope other larp-organizers will find some inspiration in this blueprint. The full manuscript for Mad about the Boy with complete character texts can be downloaded from http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org.

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Markus Montola & Staffan Jonsson

Prosopopeia — Playing on the Edge of Reality

Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*, staged in 2005, kicked off the "pervasive turn" of the Nordic larp discourse, a period during which a number of pervasive larps were staged, highly influenced by Prosopopeia and its sequel* Momentum *(2006).*

These games did not invent the idea of larping in public places. Countless Vampire larps had been played on the streets, and for example Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress *had already taken place on a ferry between Stockholm and Turku in 1996.*

Prosopopeia *and* Momentum *were special in many ways. They had high production values, they were produced in collaboration with universities, and they were further set apart by their ambitious attempts to utilize mobile technologies.*

However, the fundamental change they brought to street larp was that they engaged the world outside instead shying away from it. The larps following in their footsteps explored novel stances to the relationship of the game and the world outside.

It is impossible to exactly determine the games that constituted the pervasive turn, but the intellectual descendants of Prosopopeia *include at least* The White Road *(2006),* Agabadan *(2007),* Sanningen om Marika *(2007),* Neonhämärä *(2008-2012),* Walkabout *(2009),* Conspiracy For Good *(2010),* Lovers' Matchmaking Agency *(2011) and* The Artists *(2012).*

— Markus Montola & Staffan Jonsson

In this paper we discuss the genre of pervasive larp that seamlessly merges game and ordinary life, presenting Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll[1]*, which was intended as a proof-of-concept for the genre. In addition to being a street larp staged in the cityscape,* Prosopopeia *aimed at blurring the border of game and ordinary life by spanning over a long duration of players' lives and by forcing the players to larp with outsiders. Mixing the game content and non-game content turned out to produce a load of engaging experiences and emergent game content.*

Introduction

The aim of *Prosopopeia*[2] was to create a proof of concept for pervasive larp — essentially a prototypical combination of pervasive gaming and larping. It has been proposed earlier [70, 72] that pervasive games are games that expand the traditional magic circle of gameplay in terms of space, time and social relations: while a traditional game is played in certain places at certain times by certain people, a pervasive game purposefully breaks these limitations. The spatial boundaries are expanded by taking the game into unlimited physical places and to unmarked corners of digital space. The temporal scale is expanded as the games may last long times, being interlaced with the lives of the players and calling them to play at unforeseen moments. And the social limit of participation is expanded, as these games invite outsiders to participate in some fashion, being more or less unaware of the gamic nature of the events. In highly pervasive games nothing is certain, as even the gamic nature of the game can be obfuscated. In this paper we describe the prototype and analyze it briefly with these three dimensions.

Prosopopeia was a larp about forgotten and abandoned ideals and about freeing a lost friend who was left stuck between life and death after committing a suicide. It all started with late night phonecalls to players with strange distorted voices from the other side, providing clues that pointed at a new age festival celebrating change in the old Mayan calendar. Quoting a player debrief[3]:

> I was woken up around 01:30 [. . .] by a telephone call I wasn't able to record. I caught the numbers 12.19.13.9.0 from the telephone call and immediately fired up Google. In an hour I had discovered that this format was a Mayan date.

The festival was just a regular new age happening with nothing special about it, until the players' phones rang. Instead of a message, Nina Hagen's *Antiworld* was playing. A bit later the very same tune coming from a boom-box lead the players to chat with a punk, subsequently taking them a locker in the central station, where they acquired personal files on 12 deceased persons. Quoting another player:

> I hadn't realized there were so many people honestly engaged in the Maya calendar, colonial silver, chackra cleaning and so on. I arrived quite nervous not knowing at all what to expect. Would I become possessed at the meditation, and if so would the spirit allow me to study for my exam etc?

1 Ed.: Propospopeia Part 1: Where we Fell.

2 Prosopopoeia, 1) A rhetorical figure by which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting; the introduction of a pretended speaker; 2) A rhetorical figure by which an inanimate or abstract thing is represented as a person, or with personal characteristics (Oxford English Dictionary [75]).

3 The quotes in this paper are used mainly as illustration, they were obtained from the research questionnaire filled by the players after the game. The language in the excerpts has been corrected, and the characters and the players have been anonymized.

Piecing the story together, the players came to understand that the previous agent sent to rescue had failed, and looking for him might shed some light to the problem. The voices kept calling the players during the next week, and further scrutiny calendars lead the players to Kista, Stockholm next Friday. They were hooked up to a techno-magical device at Swedish Institute of Computer Science, allowing the twelve dead to possess them.

> I really loved the intense tempo, the feelings of fatigue and insecurity, the feeling of being herded along on a journey where I had absolutely no control over anything. These memories are what will stay with me for a long time.

The game was on: for 52 hours they followed the trail of the failed agent, discovering hideouts, looking through old documents, talking to strangers, hacking encryption and trying to discover what had happened. The journey took them all the way from high tech areas to rundown parts of the town, visiting cemeteries, ruins and rusty dock areas. Finally they found the missing spirit in an abandoned mental hospital, traumatized by rapes and considered insane for being a gifted medium. After the players talked her out of her personal hell, the helpful staff of SICS channeled the spirits out of the hosts.

Pervasive Larp

During the recent years, larp has been increasingly brought from closed spaces to urban areas (see for example Talvitie [93] and Pettersson [78]). Especially the *World of Darkness* larps have been more and more commonly played in the cityscape. In this paper we discuss *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*, which was an attempt to exploit the merging of ordinary world and game world to the fullest.

This ambitious pervasivity differentiates *Prosopopeia* from a generic urban larp. While a street game of *Vampire* lurks in cafeterias and alleys, it does not actively interact with surrounding world. The game is clearly limited to its players—if the bartender is not wearing a sign of participation, he is not an equal part of the ludic framework, but is treated like scenery. Characters might buy drinks from him, but the intent of hiding the game from the bartender is deeply written to the game genre—the goal of the vampires is to stay hidden. This approach was contested in *Prosopopeia*, where the players were expected to expect unexpected from the random passerby.

As McGonigal [66, 65] has thoroughly discussed, games that allow the players to see them as part of ordinary reality can produce very engaging and interesting gameplay experiences. A game that supports the player in pretending to believe that it is not a game can be very overwhelming and exciting experience. As an experiment, *Prosopopeia* ventured to this area, trying to combine this exciting aesthetic with a larp.

In order to create the spatial, temporal and social pervasive expansions and to merge ludic and ordinary realities seamlessly, three important design solutions were applied: the possession model, the prosopopeia proposal and runtime game mastering.

The relationship of players and characters was defined through the *possession* model.

Players played diegetic[1] versions of themselves, possessed by ghost characters during the game. This was intended to allow both character playing and reacting naturally to events not related to the game—like meeting a friend on the street. Thus, the everyday life of a player was taken as it

1 We refer to elements existing within the game world as diegetic, or existing within the diegesis. Diegesis is one player's understanding of everything that exists in the game. Off-game elements are thus non-diegetic. (See Montola [68], cf. Hakkarainen and Stenros [42]).

was, changing the ordinary life into game by adding the ghost. All these spirits were deceased people from real history.

"Play the game as if it was real" was the most important rule of the game, labeled the *prosopopeia proposal* by the organizers. The combination of the proposal and the possession model implies that while a player could discuss the game events with her boyfriend during the game, she was not allowed to refer to the game only as a game, since it was to be taken as ordinary reality. In addition to being a playing guideline, the prosopopeia proposal was a design principle: it motivated creating scenes where players had to actually do things for real. In practice this resulted in crawling in tunnels and researching real-world sources for game-relevant information.

Runtime game mastering was done through game masters playing out characters in the world in real time, in a fashion adapted from the tradition of tabletop roleplaying. Successful orchestration requires the game masters to acquire a sufficient amount of information on the player activities, and to have sufficient means to influence the player activities. Both the sensing and actuating are particularly difficult in a pervasive larp, and thus a multitude of technological solutions were applied, as discussed below.

In summary, *Prosopopeia* was built by adding ludic content to our ordinary reality but hiding the gamic nature of the added element. The players could never exactly say where the game ended and the ordinary reality began: in addition to obvious game elements and obvious unrelated elements, the game experience included many non-game elements appearing ludic and game elements being indistinguishable from the world around.

Our focus is mostly on the designs and intentions of the game organizers, discussing the player feedback and their subjective experiences a little less. This is because we want to emphasize the design lessons of *Prosopopeia* rather than the ups and downs of the unique orchestration of June 2005[1].

Prosopopeia was organized in Stockholm in June 2005. It was played by 12 players for 52 hours, but the semi-game states that lead into the game lasted for a much longer time. The artistic orchestration was lead by Martin Ericsson, Staffan Jonsson and Adriana Skarped. The game was produced in collaboration with IPerG project[2].

Technological Game Mastering

Montola [69] argues that role-playing games can be designed to be chaotic or orderly depending on the application of dissipative and integrative design solutions applied. Dissipative choices[3] make unpredictable, uncontrollable and free games, while integrative choices make predictable, controlled and pre-planned games. The *Prosopopeia* design structure, where anything could be interpreted as game-related, is extremely dissipative and chaotic. In order to give any sense to the experience, integrative structures were needed, and, as demonstrated by decades of tabletop role-playing, live game mastering is one of the strongest options available. Thus, technological solutions for runtime game mastering were implemented.

1 We plan to report our player feedback elsewhere later on.

2 Full credits according to the organizers: Martin Ericsson (lead design), Staffan Jonsson (production), Adriana Skarped (characters), Holger Jacobsson, Linus Andersson and Emil Boss (writing), Jonas Söderberg (sounds), Karl-Petter Åkesson and Pär Hansson (electronics, surveillance, wireless), and Martin Lanner, Johan Eriksson and Henrik Esbjörnsson (production assistants)

3 Choices pertaining all designed elements of the game, such as plot structure, character goal choices, power division, diegetic culture, pacing, game mastering, random elements et cetera.

In order to perform runtime game mastering, three things are needed: a sensory system, a processing system and an actuating system — in addition to the infrastructure connecting the three. Sensory system provides the information on player activities, processing system decides what to do with the information, and the actuating system executes activities. In tabletop role-playing and in smallest larps all these three functions can be trivially performed by one person, but game mastering a larp like *Prosopopeia* requires considerable technological support. The players are spread out all over the city for a long time and the actuation needs to be done either invisibly or diegetically.

Sensory information was gathered through video camera feeds, audio feeds, dialogue with characters and direct visual observation. Due to technological problems the main audio feed was unintelligible, and the practice quickly taught that video feeds are extremely uninformative, so the game masters had to rely on direct observation and dialogue with characters, the latter of which was also the sole means of actuation in the game.

All these functions were concentrated to the technological centerpiece of the game, an old reel-to-reel recorder, which was rigged with a cellphone, allowing the communication of the ghosts and the living. In the other end of the cellphone there was a game master control center, equipped with sound scramblers and synthesizers, which was manned for the full duration of the possession. According to the aesthetic of the 60's mythos of *electronic voice phenomenon* (EVP), the players recorded their questions and comments, and after rewinding the tape the ghosts mysteriously answered on the tape. In addition to the EVP machine, many non-player characters were played through the Internet.

In practice, the dialogue of game masters and players formed a large part of the game. As an unwanted side effect, this strongly integrative feature unfortunately lead many players to experience the game as very orderly and controlled, a dysfunction similar to "railroading" common in tabletop role-playing. One discernable behaviour pattern was "milking", which often occurs with railroading — the behavior where the players expect to be lead further by game masters, because they have been lead by them earlier. Thus, when the players were stuck with their investigation, they desperately tried to pump the non-player characters for extra clues.

The pacing of seamless pervasive larp turned out to be a problem, since the uncontrolled nature of ordinary reality makes it impossible to predict when players decide to spend hours chasing a red herring. Interesting solutions could be found from looking at ways of giving the players transparent feedback when they are progressing in the game. In a game like *Prosopopeia*, the players who are following a game master-designed course of action are occasionally able to confirm that they are on a correct path, as they encounter elements that clearly are game-related. Confirming that a path is incorrect is much harder, as no obvious signals can be found.

The *Prosopopeia* experiment suggests that the challenge of pervasive larp pacing and game mastering is finding the middle ground between leaving the players unguided and dragging them on excessively.

Dramaturgy of Physical Space

Prosopopeia was a spatially expanded game. It was played in unforeseen areas, and the players moving around and communicating to distant places articulated these areas into the playspace. The basic structure of playing larps in closed spaces has allowed a very detailed propping of the game locations, where literally every object can be redefined for the purposes of the game. However, in a city larp such as *Prosopopeia* it is impossible to create scenography for the whole gaming area, so usually selected small areas are propped

while the majority of gaming space is taken as it is.

Even though there were certain hotspots of player activity, very few locations were truly redefined to be something that they clearly were not. In the spirit of the prosopopeia proposal the game went strongly for *indexical propping* — the players were expected to visit a new age festival that was portrayed by a real new age festival and SICS premises that were portrayed by SICS premises. As Loponen and Montola [63] discuss, props can be categorized into symbolic, iconic and indexic categories, depending on how an object in the real world refers to an object in the diegesis. In a basic Peircean fashion a symbolic prop represents something through a convention or contract, like when a game rule states that a paper slip with the word "gun" represents a diegetic gun. Iconic prop represents something similar, like in a game where a Finnish pair of army boots represents a German pair of army boots just because they are worn by a person who larps a German soldier. Indexic prop is the third class, where the prop represents itself directly in the diegesis — and this was done a lot in *Prosopopeia*. Instead of redefining objects, the aim was to recontextualize them into the game world. By virtue of the prosopopeia proposal, all real objects were also game objects.

In *Prosopopeia* this was aimed to create a feeling where everything is a prop and thus nothing is a prop. This indexicality went much further in *Prosopopeia* than is usual, as even the social context of the props remained largely unchanged; even though in a regular urban larp a jacket may signify a perfectly identical jacket, in *Prosopopeia* the jacket signified the exact same jacket owned by the exact same person. One of the driving themes of *Prosopopeia* was to encourage players to look at their everyday environment from a new perspective, finding game clues where none existed and interacting with ordinary world in a game-inspired, free fashion. When everything is a prop, this kind of perception and interaction is encouraged.

A great upside of indexic propping is that it allows the players to solve puzzles in a real and tangible way. Players were allowed to toy with everything they encountered, and some puzzles could be solved that way as well. For instance the players could have added loudspeakers to the reel-to-reel recorder in order to make the using of the device easier — the puzzle was to understand this and to acquire some loudspeakers somehow. Indexic propping supported the realness demanded by the prosopopeia proposal: the players could fidget with the recorder just like with any regular 60's recorder.

In the spirit of the prosopopeia proposal, technological game devices had to be invisible and very convincing in order to fabricate the indexicality. According to player feedback, the rigged EVP recorder succeeded in this, and was appreciated for that by the players.

> The [recorder] was excellent, it made it so much more close to reality. The technology was physical proof that this was actually happening and we weren't only playing a game.

The requirement of indexicality in cityscape allowed *Prosopopeia* interesting opportunities in designing the dramaturgy and the aesthetic of the space used in the game. Discovery and exploration were central themes, and thus many of the events took place in desolate urban areas, offering the players a tour into the blind spots of urban landscape. This aesthetic was borrowed from the urban exploration movement for purposes of both adding dramatic tension to the gaming areas, and offering tangible physical action in cityscape. While a regular larpwright transforms a private place into a gaming area with scenography, *Prosopopeia* looked for semi-public locations in the urban landscape that already suited the design of the game. The game could only feature a scene in Beckomber-

ga mental hospital, because Beckomberga mental hospital was available for the use of the game. Where scenography was done, it tried to fabricate reality as perfectly as possible — the design goal for the propping was to make the perceived image of the game locations be the same for a player and a non-player, in a way where the player could reinterpret the meaning of the objects through the game filter[1].

Urban exploration is often done in areas where an ordinary person is not allowed to go, and doing so may require avoiding security guards. *Prosopopeia* exploited this tension and the forbidden feeling of these places by introducing game master security guards patrolling some of these areas; for instance the players were expected to sneak into the hospital rented by the organizers. Even though entering the asylum was legal — the place was rented for the game — the entering was given the tension of trespassing by introducing the guards and by not openly disclosing the legality.

Indexic propping may cause problems of excessive authenticity. Some *Prosopopeia* players reported that they had almost missed the central playing venue, a rusty old boat in a repelling dock area, since it didn't appear to be a gaming area. Obviously the game needs to incorporate failsafes ensuring that the most critical parts of the game are discovered. The players might have refused to enter the mental asylum if they considered it very illegal or dangerous. Also, if representation is largely indexic, the players are bound to be confused when encountering symbolic and iconic props — like the webcameras *Prosopopeia* organizers used to monitor the game.

Discovering the prepared locations in *Prosopopeia* was designed to happen in a branching structure, where the players could find and go through locations in the order they wanted. However, players reported this experience as very linear. One of the main reasons of this was that the clues leading to locations were hidden in difficult puzzles, and thus they entered every location as soon as they found a clue pointing there. Another reason was that the game designers had overestimated the players' initiative and competence to solve the puzzles to the locations and were forced to make runtime maneuvers to provide the players with the clues needed for progression[2].

In the beginning of the game the players knew the overview space of the game, but they only had the access to a limited number of prepared locations. Later on in the scenario they got access to more and more locations, while losing access to some. This kind of location structure can be used as a tool in designing game progression and pacing, while still giving the players a large degree of freedom. The players can explore and move between the locations they have access to at the moment and unfold the scenario in their own way and liking. The information about the next locations could be hidden as a clue somewhere in the locations the players already have access to,

1 There was one exception to this rule, one area that was not adequately scenographed. One minor place was used for a brief period only, and thus the limited resources were spent elsewhere. In that area the illusion was severely broken, which might have been a mistake considering the general high-end quality of propping in the game.

2 Fatland [28] discusses linear, branching and nonlinear plot structures in detail in larp context. The lesson of Prosopopeia is that in addition to applying a branching or nonlinear structure, the larpwright must ensure that the lack of linearity is communicated to the players. Many players (at least in our sample) strongly prefer the feeling of freedom in the game, and the design flaws mentioned made players lose that feeling in a non-pleasurable fashion.

hidden in puzzles or provided to the players by the game masters.

Transportation is also an important part of the spatial dramaturgy of urban larp. In *Prosopopeia* it did not include any clues or game content to the players, but it provided them with low intensity gameplay where they could interact socially, explore the possessing spirits' attitudes and feelings for the world today and the situation at hand. Casual everyday experiences gave them the possibility to explore the city from the possessing spirits' perspective, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> The most memorable situation of being possessed around people was our very early morning snack at 7-eleven at 5.30 am the first morning. The whole experience was surreal; the feeling of being alive and open to the world mixed with everyone else's drunken happiness. A completely unknown person (if he wasn't one of yours) actually fed me pizza as I tried to enter the shop.

Life-Game Merger

Being a temporally expanded pervasive game, *Prosopopeia* merged the game time with non-playing time in several fashions. Most of this took place before the main event, before the possession, but the game time and ordinary life time were also merged during the main larp phase by the possession model.

In *Prosopopeia* design there were two game modes: ambiguous game time and dedicated game-time. The game began with an ambiguous preparatory phase, and then continued with a weekend-long period of dedicated game time making up the main larp event.

During the preparatory phase the game was in the state of dormancy, waiting to enter the lives of players at planned times. Players were expected to conduct their everyday business, remembering the prosopopeia proposal if something unexpected happened. In the dedicated game time the players were supposed to be ready to be possessed by the ghosts, spending their time quite actively with the game.

For the players of *Prosopopeia* the first entrance into the game was clearly marked on the application webpage, by the following text: "You should now do all you can to forget about this project until it contacts you again. This is the only time the game will be presented as such. From now on everything is real." Pushing the button meant entering the preparatory phase of the game, even though the player was given no character. The typical elements of larp participation were absent; the only rule provided was the prosopopeia proposal. The players were aware that they were supposed to larp themselves, and that the dormant game could enter their lives at any time without them knowing it.

Weeks later the players were introduced to the game with a series of nightly voice messages from entities beyond death. These messages lead the players to the preparatory new age festival, with almost no specific game content at all. Even this event, where the players met each other in real life was part of the dormant game. Instead of prepared game content, the event was full of real new age mysticism, which players were expected to take for real according to the prosopopeia proposal.

In the end of the festival day the players received the character materials on their upcoming ghost characters. All this material was also diegetic, and available for the players within the game. The players were not given non-diegetic character information at all, along the lines of the prosopopeia proposal integrating everything non-diegetic into the diegesis, but they were expected to work out their characters from the diegetic materials they were given. In a quite unusual fashion, players could have read each other's character materials within the game, still without breaking the illusion in any way.

The main phase started a week after the festival, with players entering the basement of SICS, where they were infused by SICS staff. Possession was done through a technomystical ritual involving audiotapes where the ghost characters addressed the players directly.

This marked the beginning of the possession. During the main phase the players were allowed to larp themselves, the possessing spirits, or any mixture of the ghosts and the hosts. In order to succeed in the game, the players actually had to use the possession model to its fullest; combining the backgrounds of the ghosts with the contemporary skills of the hosts. Interaction with the world outside was easiest through the hosts, of course, but in some cases the ghosts needed to talk with outsiders as well. For example, one player reported the following:

> I did not at any time openly play myself, but at several occasions did my personality shine through quite clearly. Some of the puzzles required my personal skills rather than those of the spirit, and being under constant pressure to solve them created a sort of "quest mode", mustering all my personal resources. [. . .] Come to think of it, actually at one point I called [a relative] to find out how to get to Beckomberga, she worked there in the seventies. I then played myself, but probably it was just [the ghost] using my voice.

The possession model was expected to eliminate the players' need to step outside the game; whenever the game would excessively disturb the ordinary life, the player could quit playing the ghost and revert to playing himself in the game world. However, it should be pointed out that this didn't work perfectly, and several of the players reported game occurrences where someone had broken the prosopopeia proposal:

> But I really can't say I "played" myself [when I called my girlfriend]. Not consciously that is. Also when I had knowledge that the spirit didn't have, I used that as myself. Like using the Internet for instance, or my ATM-card.

To further add the confusion, sometimes the events of *Prosopopeia* were also discussed as a game within the diegetic reality of the prosopopeia proposal. For instance, the characters were hinted that in many occasions they might want to lie to the outsiders, claiming that their strange activities were actually a part of a game. In the following excerpt a game master character is found from a tunnel in the game. He's claiming that *Prosopopeia* is a game, since he has regressed to denial after deeply traumatizing (diegetic) possession-related events.

> We found [the agent] curled up in the dark not very far down. We managed to talk him into coming with us. He kept saying "It's only a game, nothing is real."

The players also broke the prosopopeia proposal mentally when accidentally peeking behind the scenes, for instance when seeing game masters in wrong places. Curiously, they also occasionally broke the proposal when they mistakenly believed that they had seen behind the scenes — for instance once when encountering a person whom they mistakenly believed to be one of the ghost voice actors. Just as interesting game experiences emerge from the seamless merging of life and game, off-game experiences emerge as well.

Playing with Non-players

In addition to breaking the boundaries of playing area and playing time, *Prosopopeia* also expanded the traditional social boundary of larp, including outsiders into the game in many ways.

Outsider involvement helped in making the life-game merger more perfect and more seamless. Many strategies were used: game content was placed in the hands of unaware outsiders, some outsiders were

given instructions by the game masters, and sometimes the players had to accomplish missions involving outsiders.

The former two strategies both bolster the feeling of realness. The advantage of using unaware outsiders is that they are more real as they are not part of the game. One downside is that as they do not realize the importance of the game content, they might not tell the players the critical information or might not show them the important prop. If the piece of information is vital, the latter strategy of instructed outsiders should be preferred.

Each character in the game was also given a mission that involved the outside world and interaction with bystanders. For example, one of the possessing spirits was a pioneer of free communal housing and wanted to manifest this by sheltering a homeless person for a night. Another spirit was a Catholic Christian, wanting to confess her sins committed in life that had not been forgiven in her life. The player had a mission to go to a mass and discuss with a (non-involved) priest. These missions were both very powerful and extremely demanding; unfortunately, many *Prosopopeia* players left these quests undone, so deeper analysis is not possible[1].

On occasion outsiders became involved in the game accidentally or unpredictably. Mostly these were casual encounters on the streets, but two specific cases deserve mentioning. The first one happened next to a graveyard in Stockholm, where the players tried to communicate with the dead using the EVP-recorder. A player describes:

> A guy came by when we were using the tape machine at Skogskyrkogården. We talked to him for a while, but couldn't figure out if he was involved in the game or not. This I think is the best part, where you have no way of knowing if a person or experience is created with intent or not.

Believing that the stranger might have been involved with the game the players spent a considerable amount of time discussing game-related issues with him. Even though the discussion never dropped a critical clue to the players, they were afterwards extremely uncertain on whether the encounter was staged or coincidental.

In the second case a player sent some emails to his friend during the game, including some discussion related to the game events. He described ending up in a foreign city after confusing sequence of events, and that he was planning to head back home next. According to his account, the discussion probably was somewhat disquieting from the outsider perspective.

These examples demonstrate that the borderline of a pervasive larp and ordinary reality is uncontrollable to both the game masters and the players. The email in the latter case was completely spontaneous piece of game action from the player's behalf, not provoked by larpwrights in any predictable way. The former incident was also beyond player control, as they were not aware on whether the bypasser had a relationship with a game or not. Even asking the stranger directly would not have confirmed his relationship to the game, as it is possible to involve outsiders even without telling them — *Prosopopeia* organizers planned to have an actor performing game-related activities before the main event in the areas players were expected to frequent, in order to make it theoretically possible to meet witnesses who'd seen the events. Unfortunately this was not done due to unexpected problems with scheduling.

In addition to this direct social expansion of involving non-players with the game, *Prosopopeia* also took the border of ludic

1 Due to an unfortunate miscommunication, the debrief questionnaire lacked the questions that would have shed light to reasons of not pursuing the tasks.

and ordinary down indirectly, in game background and reality fabrication. Many elements in the story were fitted for or inspired by the historical backgrounds of the characters, so it can be argued that several important game events had really happened before the game even began. Thus, the players could google up significant additional information on their characters, and find out both important and irrelevant clues about their past. Quoting a debrief:

> I read up on EVP in general, the Maya calendar and the spirit world mythos within the EVP context. Some of this was discussed by email [among the players before the possession]. [. . .] No solid "clues" were found, but a lot of background material that helped explain the game story.

Even this googling was occasionally controlled by the game organizers, as they took many existing sources of information and altered the content for the purposes of the game. For example one website was duplicated in its entirety, hundreds of pages of occult lore, just adding some six pages to it. This reality hacking was used to fabricate substantial amounts of data for the players to scrounge. Also, the chance of randomly finding game-related information was introduced.

Conclusions

We have described *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* as an example of where an ambitious pervasive larp can go, briefly going through the methodology and the philosophy of the game. Although the implementation of the game was far from flawless, it demonstrated the genuine value of seamless merging of ordinary and ludic, as well as ideas such as indexic propping and the possession model. Clearly, such design features have significant potential in creating new kinds of engaging game experiences (also McGonigal [66]).

Prosopopeia experimented mixing of ambiguous content and confirmed game content, creating the certainty of *Prosopopeia* being a game but leaving it ambiguous where the game content ended and real world began. This mixture proved to have advantages, but there are also design challenges that need to be solved in the future.

Prosopopeia also demonstrated that active runtime game mastering is possible even in a boundless open space larp, if sufficient technological and personnel resources are present. Such tools need to be used with care, in order to avoid guiding the game too obviously. Another important technical lesson learn was that surveillance technology has to be applied with care. Even though there were cameras installed in every (private) location the players visited, the utility of the video feed was low, due to bad quality of the image, player movement and labour-intensivity. Assessing the state of the social process of the game by looking at video feed is very difficult, and audio feed suits the task much better. Also, concealing video cameras is a lot harder than concealing microphones. Tools to monitor the state, position, information flow and social dynamics in the player group need to be developed further.

In this paper we have not addressed the ethical lessons of *Prosopopeia*. Obviously, looking at ethical issues is extremely important for pervasive gaming, and the challenges are significant especially for the extreme forms such as *Prosopopeia*. We are investigating issues like player privacy and outsider experiences elsewhere in project IPerG.

The next step is to take this proof of concept to another level, by scaling the larp up in terms of number of participants and duration of the game. In order to accomplish this scaling we will focus on generic, reusable technology, rather than dedicated technology that was used here. According to the plans the next game could be 5-10 times larger, and last 5-10 times longer. Such scaling unfortunately might require downscaling in the detail of background work and authenticity of propping.

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Gabriel Widing

Collective Realities

Thoughts on Politics, Ontology, and Role-Playing

The infamous swedish critics of role-playing Örnstedt & Sjöstedt in their 1996 book De övergivnas armé *(The Army of the Abandoned) stated this: "A changed approach to moral concepts and view on society could lead to a sudden transformation of the roleplaying hobby into a militant political movement." I found that idea very inspiring and was tired that larp was considered fun and games only. In 2006 I made an issue of* Interacting Arts *dedicated to a politicisation of the Nordic larp scene. The issue contained a survey with some prominent writers of the scene about the relationship between larp and radical thought. It was basically what in a leftist tradition is called "militant research". It aimed to make them think of larp as a political practise and to "come out of the closet" as socially and politically engaged, struggling with capitalism as well as patriarchy.*

This text was my own contribution to that issue. The way I see it today it is far too idealistic, even if I give a shot at formulating the economical conditions for larp as a sacrificial act. I would stick to the idea that collectivity is the most important part of larp and that our culture has the potential to develop a politics of withdrawal.

— Gabriel Widing

I have perceived a small but important change in the use of language among the people I usually play with. Earlier, we spoke in terms of fiction and reality. Today, we speak of realities. We have changed a dualistic discourse for a pluralistic. This change has brought sweeping consequences. As a political activist I am faced with a frightening choice, one which I aim to share with you. Are we going to change our lives within a collectively constructed reality, or within the consensus reality?

In this essay I am discussing the subculture that has been created surrounding live role-playing and how this medium can be used as a political method. To help me I have the blood-thirst of the Indians of the American northwest, which peaked many hundred years ago. Later I'll talk about the Zapatista, who have declared war upon the Mexican authorities — and laid down their arms — a struggle that has been ongoing the last ten years.

Role-play and Reality

Politics is about how power is exercised and distributed. I am not advocating that everyone should have the exact same amount of resources all the time, but that a greater dynamic should be in force. The economic oppression that exists in society today is relatively marginal; what's worse is that during every waking moment our senses are fed with stimuli that we have neither power over nor insight into. In the western world, the powers over the means of stimuli are more important than the power over the means of production.

Live role-playing has taught me that a reality can be constructed. We can have power over our own experiences. The prerequisite for this is that we, as a collective, have "signed" a common agreement. The reality we live in daily has demanded the same type of contract; it is full of conventions on how social interaction is supposed to work.

By taking a step back, into another reality, not only does this forced upon contract become visible but it also shows that a different one can be created. This is the most important message of the roleplaying medium.

Consensus Reality

I'm naming the reality we experience in our daily lives the consensus reality. Within, we have a common way of looking at the world. Everyone doesn't view everything the exact same way, but there exists a large number of "common denominators". We all know that mythical creatures don't exist for real. Because they are — that's right — mythical! And even if some nutcase really believes in mythical creatures, he or she is relating it to established myth and in this way the consensus reality is affirmed yet again.

Working politically in the consensus reality sometimes feels hopeless. Everything is already constructed. From the fibres of our clothing to the vast, urban landscapes that constantly surround us. We didn't vote for social-democrat politics — we were born into a social-democrat society. Art is supposed to remain within its limits, music on stages and the architecture must not be touched unless you have top grades and want to spend five more years in a classroom. Here are seven parties in a row all humming to the same tune. It feels like the social contracts have already been written for life.

I'm not going to get more cynical than this. My ambition is to talk about tactics. After all, consensus reality is one of the arenas we can use.

Roles and Power

Role-playing teaches us something that we can put to great use in political and social settings, namely that power is a relationship, a figment where everyone needs to stick to his or her role. It is impossible to act high status if those surrounding you will not lower their status. You cannot act low status either if the other participants

refuse to accept it. It works the same way in consensus reality.

AN EXAMPLE: If we refuse to answer the subway patrolman's questions about why we didn't pay the fare but rather calmly get up and wait for the next stop and get off, the patrolman cannot exercise his power over us. We need to affirm the power if it is to be kept. A guard doesn't exist until you lay your eyes on him or her. You can just pass by. Social methods of change and avoidance of repression are solid up to the point where the power opts to use brute force in order to restrict your actions.

Collective Realities

During a live role-play we construct a new reality together. As children of a post-modern paradigm we have been taught that "everyone experiences the world in a different way" and that "no way of looking at the world is less valuable than any other". Ergo, if we create a reality, it has the same value as the "real" reality. The only difference is that we have the power over our collectively created reality. We can disappear — live beyond sheepish politicians, invasive corporations, a troubled past, a fat-assed patriarchy and a state monopoly of violence. Together we write new social protocols, find an aesthetic, develop a rhythm of life and allow our bodies to become tools for new, interesting ways to interact.

No matter what problems you put at the top of your agenda, one thing is certain: you and your friends have a greater chance of reducing them together, in a closed space, than succeeding to save the entire world in some sort of never-ending crusade.

TO PUT IT SIMPLY: imagine that your play never ends. What if we could form a bubble and slowly sail away with our common dreams as propellant.

In Defence of Sectarianism

Doesn't this sound like the practises of a sect? Yes. But there is a great difference — and it is again about power. Most sects not only form and agree on a common view of the world, they also push the power they have created upwards. Not only in the hierarchic social structures that compose the organisation, but also to something as abstract as a "god". In this the sect loses its liberating potential.
Perhaps we role-players also move power upwards, to an undefined narrative. Who has the power over what is hard to establish. When does the story stop being a tool and starts feeling like a constraint? Every tool apparently limits its user. Our characters limit our freedom of action. An analysis of power needs to be ever present.

Sectarianism, in the meaning that one bottles up in a collective for a long time, is a method to be considered. As long as one strives to create democratic structures, of course. The world view that we are forced to accept in consensus reality is as frightening as the worldview of the Christian (or whatever) sects.

Sectarianism is often looked upon as a method of limiting the freedom of movement of the individual. But it can also create new spaces to act in when reality feels too constricting. I'm not trying to say that we should stop each other from breaking with the realities that we have created, that would be as crazy as stopping people from travelling and living in whatever nation state they please. The economic structure of most sects is despicable. When the majority works their asses off to give their collected resources to a few, something is amiss. This structure is easily recognisable from many aspects of the world — if one bottles up one should take the time to look for a non-hierarchical economic model.

Sub-cultural Potlatch

The subculture we are a part of surrounds live role-playing in one form or other. It possesses a reversed economical problem that reminds strongly of the wild workings of the Indian



Georges Bataille (Illustration: Gabriel Widing)

Tlingith-tribe. The French philosopher and surrealist Georges Bataille analysed the phenomenon of potlatch in the late forties. In his book *La part maudite* (1949) he writes about the different economics of various Indian tribes. Potlatch means that the one who can give the greatest gift and not expect something back has the greater power. Wasting was seen as a sign that one had the gods on one's side. The gift was the most important form of potlatch, but not the only one. Giving becomes a form of insult because it forces an answer. It was also possible to secure status by a spectacular destruction of assets. Human sacrifice could be gifts in elaborate sacrificial ceremonies that often took the form of a party. The Indians adopted different characters with special functions. In this way, live role-playing reminds of potlatch and the religious sacrifice. Among the potlatch cultures, the loss should be as large as possible for the deed to have real meaning. Taking injury gave honour and glory. It works the same way in the live role-playing community, but fortunately not as much blood is spilled.

A desperate expression of the will to make a sacrifice is what we call "hardcore". It is often about a waste of assets. Buying the cloth for the expensive costume, spending hundreds of man-hours to make armour or to carve a harp. Almost as often the aim is to push and risk one's physical boundaries in and out of character; eating poorly, cutting oneself, jumping into ice cold water or in some other manner proving oneself ready to sacrifice everything for the game.

Organisers give the participant a lot of fantastic things; ideas, aesthetics, characters and logistics. The participant has no way to repay this other than praising the game afterwards. The organiser's social status is raised to the skies by the participants, they have no other way of expressing their gratitude. This is probably one of the reasons organisers can't receive pay for their work — it would mean a breach with our economic structure. When it happens it is considered dirty, the sacrifice of the organiser is not as potent. There are always rumours of how many thousand crowns this or that organiser are in debt after a game; it is apparently important to us to recognize each other's losses.

In this sacrificial economy we can also find one of the reasons behind the fact that a white middle and upper class is over-represented among live roleplayers. We have rich parents, a long education and resources to waste.

I don't think organisers or participants spend time live roleplaying in order to gain status in a subculture. I see it rather as an unfortunate consequence of what we're doing. This is the problem with the type of gift-economy that is used in our subculture. It creates a type of rivalry and debt. If we want to change this we need to build new structures where organisers and participants share the responsibility, the pleasure and not the least the sacrifice that our unproductive games require.

We must also be prepared to become productive. Firstly to sustain ourselves in



Subcommandante Marcos (Illustration: Gabriel Widing)

a closed system. Food, warmth, shelter. Every reality that wants to be autonomous must function as a self-sustaining unit.

Back to Reality

What many in the consensus reality agree upon is that everything is going down the drain. Our civilization is completely unsustainable. It is just a question of time, yes, that is what people say. Can we really leave this sinking ship and all its passengers? Float away in a shaky raft on our own adventures'... is this really ok? I guess not. On the other hand, who are we to say what is good or bad for the World with a capital 'W'? There should be no more utopian dreams of "perfect" societies. It usually ends so poorly.

Do we have a responsibility for holding a door open to a newly created reality? What if one could, just like Alice in Wonderland, fall down a rabbit hole in reality and end up in a new world! A reality should at least be open for communication with the outside world. The problem is that our bubbles, if we really decide to create them, will be fragile. A pinprick from consensus reality can be enough to break everything down. It is easy, as an outsider, to break down an agreement if you do not know about it. We also know that our worlds require great trust for everyone involved.

Middle Ground

Of course it must be possible to find tools for interaction between collective realities and consensus reality. Why not be satisfied with temporary zones? Perhaps this is what we should do, and what we, in a way, are doing. That means we can pause a while, rethink, and start fresh. Another path is to make collective re-interpretations of consensus reality in order to break free from its constraints. If we yet again glance across the Atlantic, but remain in the present, we have something to learn from the Indians that have the Mayans as their ancestors.

Taking a Little Help from the Zapatista

Ten years ago there was a revolt in the southernmost state of Mexico, Chiapas. During the first two weeks of the struggle it was an armed one, but since then the rebels have laid down their arms and work as a social movement under the name of "Zapatism".

The name of the movement comes from Emilio Zapata, who fought for the farmers during the Mexican revolution in the early 20th century. It is built on two simple premises: conflict and the creation of consensus. They were organised along a system of direct democracy in village councils. When they are forced to elect representatives they must "control obeyingly" — this means that they are not, like the Swedish politicians, elected like people who can wave to and fro, but rather as representatives of their village. They can be resigned without warning and can never have a post more than two years. Their highest decid-

ing entity is called Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee.

The important thing is that one achieves consensus within the village or commune. The Zapatista have formed autonomous communes which are economically independent from the government. Thanks to this independence it is possible for them to have an ongoing conflict with the Mexican right-wing conservative government and neoliberal trade organisations such as NAFTA. In the Chiapas, worker communes form the basis of all corporations, instead of capitalist ownership. By building alternative structures the Zapatista have managed to undermine the power structures. Subcomandante Marcos, one of the spokespeople of the Zapatista, puts it this way:

> We came here only to say we are here. We are a reflection and a cry and we will always be there. We can be with or without a face, armed or without fire. But we are Zapatistas as we will always be.

What the Indians of the Chiapas are missing, but something that we have in live role-plays, is he ability to create all-encompassing aesthetics. It can make our communes stick together even better. It is possible for the Zapatista, from their collectively created zones, to have a conflict with national politics and structure of society. In the same way, we could use the bubbles of live role-plays as starting points to gather energy for conflicts with consensus reality. The pulsating dynamic which exists in closing — opening — closing is powerful and beckoning.

A Web of Realities

> The echo goes on, a reflected image of the possible and forgotten: the possibility and necessity of speaking and listening; not an echo that fades away, or a force that decreases after reaching its apogee. An echo that turns itself into many voices, into a network of voices…
>
> – Subcommandante Marcos

There is nothing to stop us from forming many alternative bubbles which can cooperate within federative structures. They can communicate and trade in some fitting manner. Perhaps through potlatch, after all. Imagine being a vagabond of realities — what if a biking trip between Stockholm and the suburb Södertälje could offer as diverse cultural shifts as between Wall Street and Mecca? Imagine a network of people and groups with a common approach — the creation of new worlds.

The Question of Insurance

I'm planning on remaining in consensus reality a while. But among me and my friends spreads an idea of creating a group collecting and saving small resources — an insurance. Some time, if life here becomes unbearable, we will be able to use them in a collective action…

> … to leave this world.

GW

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Tova Gerge

Larp and Aesthetic Responsibility

When Just a Little Lovin' Became an Art Debate

I wrote this essay in response to a Swedish newspaper debate from 2011 about whether or not larp is the right medium to treat the outbreak of HIV (as the larp Just a Little Lovin' *did). Through recapitulating and analyzing the debate, I try to map the present positions of larp in the Swedish cultural infrastructure and discuss what kind of aesthetic responsibility could come with increased cultural power.*

I still agree with the article in its choice of language and content. I think the article was written for two main types of readers, both of which I wanted to lecture a bit (as inoffensively as I could). The first type would be the larpers, who I wanted to teach that they are no longer underdogs. I also wanted to push the importance of knowing what kind of stories you tell and why. The second type would be the people trying to understand larp. I wanted to show them just a glimpse of the enormous diversity and social challenges going on in the gaming community.

Third and fourth types are of course also warmly welcome to read.

— Tova Gerge

Between March and May of 2011, something quite uncommon happened in one of Sweden's biggest newspapers, Expressen: a relatively long-running debate about the artistic values of a larp.

The larp was Just a Little Lovin', a game with the tagline "1982: It was the summer AIDS came to New York City". The debate – initiated by the art critic Philip Teir and continued by among others me and the game's designers, Hanne Grasmo and Tor Kjetil Edland – was both about the specific characteristics of larp as an art form, about what artistic responsibility is, about who has the right to retell what parts of the AIDS epidemic and in what way. Though the debate was touching on highly explosive subjects, much more could have been said, and some of the in my opinion most important questions disappeared in the usual linguistic noise between larpers and non-larpers. Thus, I will now use this media event as a stepping stone for elaborating on questions about larp, responsibility and the privilege of interpretation.

Controversy

On the 30th of March 2011, Philip Tier writes in an article that he is troubled by what he perceives as a sort of AIDS exoticism in the game *Just a Little Lovin'*. He asks if it is really up to anyone to play ill, and suspects that the urge to do so is mainly about basking in the soiled glory of an aestheticized tragedy in queer Greenwich Village. He also writes that what he appreciates about Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* – one of the most famous fictive accounts of the AIDS epidemic's outbreak in New York – is how it makes itself visible as a written construction all the time through constant references to philosophy and religious theory.

He seems to draws the conclusion that this is something a game cannot do, and that, because of this, no game can take responsibility for a history as sensitive as the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, he makes reference to a theater performance that premiered at Teater Galeasen in Stockholm during the spring of 2011, *Bli en dåre! (Become a Loony!)*. This show used some interactive elements to explore the world of psychiatric care, and as Tier understands it, both the director and the dramaturge in such a set-up are replaced by the game designer. This seems to worry him.

Anxiety about the dissolution of a clear and stable authorship is for me a much less valid remark than the question about who owns the history – who can play ill – because I think this question should be asked more frequently not only by organizers, but also by players. Larpers are all about using histories that are not exactly their own, but we talk very little about what this means to both ourselves and others. In fact, I have hardly even approached the subject since one of my very first larp debates, maybe because it did not work out very well that time. It started with me doing a blunt attack against a group of girls who used to play prostitutes in medieval and fantasy larps. I wanted to know from what angle they explored the worlds of sexual abuse and human slavery that they were toying around with in their character descriptions, and I was concerned with the contrast between that reality and what I could only perceive as an enactment of "the happy whore" in a fantasy setting.

After some angry emails back and forth, the conversation ended with me asking for forgiveness for being so aggressive. I probably would not have been capable of taking it any further without putting my own position at risk – like everyone else I knew, I had written into character descriptions that my parents died in orc battles (or whatever), and no one ever had any remarks about that except that it was lacking in originality. What if instead they would have asked me what I knew about that sort of situation, having your parents killed in a war? Or why I used that image and how I thought it would affect me to play with that for a week? If this would have been the case, fantasy larps would have been something completely different than what they were, and maybe a lot of people would not have dared to attend. There can be a lot at

stake when you larp, not least your social position, and to have it scrutinized before entering a game might be a major turn-off for many. Still, I think there is really something to gain in asking ourselves more seriously what kind of pleasure and what kind of politics we engage in when we larp. This not only because we live in a time when gamers become artists, artists become gamers, and where the concept of game is highly political, but also because it is so much easier for me as a fellow larper to hit the right spot if I know what to aim for.

None of this was in my response, published the 1st of April, to Teir's article. Being sheepishly loyal towards the larping movement whenever there is an attack from the "outside", I focused mainly on giving a different account of how aesthetic responsibility functions in a larp setting, defending the format of collective autonomous storytelling that seemed to frighten Tier. I stated that there is nothing inherently more defensible in staging Kushner's Angels in America or Strindberg's Miss Julie the hundredth time than in making a three day game about AID S or about the Swedish culture of honor. Additionally, I pointed out the fact that larpers often spend weeks doing research about their role and its historical context (if there is one). I proposed that this would make larpers less likely than, for example, theater goers – who have just a few hours to grasp a complex story – to simply reproduce worn-out clichés. I thus argued that understanding how players invest personally and emotionally in a story – that is not made to be shown, interpreted or understood by someone outside the game – must be at the base if you want to formulate an accurate critique against a larp. I also took the occasion to briefly flunk *Bli en dåre!* both as a game and as a piece of theater, since I considered this performance an example par excellence of an aesthetic experience that did not take responsibility for the story that it used.

New Participants

Johan Wennström, a right-wing journalist with no specific qualification within art or larp, entered the conversation on the 4th of April with the main concern that contemporary culture is strangely fascinated with suffering and illness. For him, there is no difference between a subcultural event in Oslo and a theater performance in an established venue in Stockholm as long as they focus on the dark sides of being human. He also seems to have lost the capacity for doing an internet search, since he ends his article by asking where one can find art that shows "the best sides of life".

The 7th of April, the organizers of *Just a Little Lovin'*, Grasmo and Edland, responded to the two critical articles. Regarding Wennström, they argue that the romantic comedy is not under threat of extinction, and that the contemporary art scene needs something else than showing the best sides of life, otherwise it becomes too flat and makes too little friction. They thus implicitly establish a norm for art as a zone for examining conflicts, and they explicitly point out the first outbreak of the AIDS epidemic as an event that is interestingly charged because of how it touched the Western world's conception of death.

When it comes to Teir's initial remarks, they answer that although it is important to treat sensitive questions with respect, there is also a need for creating new fiction about AIDS, fiction that takes risks in both its form and content. They consider larp an art form, and as such particularly useful in how it incorporates the subjective experience, rather than prescribes or controls how a media consumer should feel. At the same time, they address the fact that larp is a subculture where fantasy games represent the norm, and where a larp about AIDS is very much in the avant-garde of a scene that is undergoing drastic changes.

For me as a larper, Grasmo and Edland's attempt to contextualize *Just a Little Lovin'* points towards other subcultural issues, such as what kind of statement it is

to make a game with mainly male homosexual roles in a larping community where the vast majority of the fictions that players enter reproduce a heterosexual and often profoundly sexist world order. Of course, this choice has not only an aesthetic or story building value, but actually breaks with a long gaming tradition of aligning the character's gender and desires with what is perceived as the player's biological sex. And as the casting debate around the Stockholm version of the tango larp *In Fair Verona* showed, this is certainly not a logic reserved for medieval and fantasy genres.

This larp set off discussions when the organizers stated that players should sign up with an opposite sex dance partner, and explained this by saying that queer desire was off-topic. After having this decision questioned in various ways, the organizers eventually changed the registration rules so that you could sign up for playing man/leader or woman/follower in a heterosexual couple regardless of how your body was perceived in everyday life – meaning, they admitted that heterosexual tango clichés can be portrayed also by players who do not align their characters with their assigned real life gender. This change in policy must be considered rather exceptional. In most cases, the question is not even raised. A larp like *Just a Little Lovin'* does not only show how strong the heterosexual larp norm is by being an exception, it also forces those who don't fit into the category of "male homosexual" in everyday life to do what any gender wildcard has always been forced to do in mainstream scenarios: work to pass.

What a game or a performance does to the social field in which it is inscribed is for me as an important criteria for a "good" aesthetic experience as happy endings seem to be for Wennström. This leads me back to why I considered the theater performance *Bli en dåre!* irresponsible in how it approached its theme of institutional mental care. Not only did I think that this play tried to make things light and fun in a superficial way, not only was I provoked by how it reproduced all possible clichés around mental illness and hospitalization – most of all, I was upset with how clumsily it covered any visitor's own experiences of psychiatric care by inserting a vague element of "interaction" that allowed almost no freedom for visitors, but a lot of chances for actors to improvise generic craziness in between the long sections of set, badly written material.

In this sense, *Bli en dåre!* did not give its community of visitors the chance to take a critical passive position as spectators, nor an actively renegotiating position as players. What the piece then did to its social fields was in my opinion not to open people's eyes for the potential of interactive elements in stage art, nor to seriously question norms in the mental care system, nor to open a platform for the audience to present their own histories. Rather, it consolidated common place prejudices about both interactive arts and about madness.

After visiting the show, I came to think of Johanna MacDonald's article "There You Are, There You Ain't – Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart", where she gives an account of how she experienced SIGNA's performance *The 11th Knife*. MacDonald revisits her initial confusion with a game that seemed to be ongoing between the performers, but obscure to the visitors, who were presented with neither roles nor rules. However, she gradually found a way into the game, discovering only when her friends dropped by to look at the performance that playing had slightly altered her persona and made it uncomfortable for her to interact with people who knew her as someone else.

I briefly asked myself if *Bli en dåre!* could have allowed for something similar, but in my experience, this was not the case. Despite the fact that all spectators got either a caretaker's or a patient's coat when they arrived, the actors of the piece were not primarily playing a game with the audience or each other – they were not interacting, they were acting. So, to enter their scene would

not have been a question of grasping their rules, but breaking their rules.

Once during my three hour visit in the seventy-two hour scenario (seventy-two hours that were really more like a collection of shorter sets with certain episodes looped so that all audience members would see them, and with the chance to do one or two ordinary sleepovers, without any theater during the night), an audience member interrupted a preset scene with a comment. This was tolerated but not actively acted upon – exactly what would happen in any theater setting where the fourth wall is not breached.

In my opinion, the most "interactive" parts of this performance occurred in the glitches between activities, when visitors were led from theater chairs to strictly framed but easygoing daycare activities or to contentless yes-or-no quizzes where the actors got perplexed if you answered something as elaborate as "maybe". Walking from one room to another in the company of a person who had no other task than helping to find the way, gave the opportunity to connect in a new way and have a non-scripted interaction.

Apart from these – most likely unintended – breaks in the web of fiction, I had a hard time seeing how it was possible to do a serious emotional or political investment in this kind of hybrid. Certainly no investment could happen on the same terms as the actors, who followed a script that was not open for hacking or resistance. The artistic team in this sense established themselves as an authority in interpreting mental illness, something that certain critics accepted, while others, especially people with a personal experience of psychiatric care, strongly disapproved. One of those was Ann Heberlein, who felt that the world of *Bli en dåre!* was disconnected from the reality of Swedish healthcare and had more to do with washed-out remakes of stories like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Girl, Interrupted*, *Shutter Island* or other Hollywood productions about conditions that are profoundly different from the ones that matter in people's lives here and now.

Good or Bad References

I agree with Heberlein that whatever intimate experiences the makers of *Bli en dåre!* might have had of different types of illness and care, they most certainly didn't use it very convincingly in their theater work. Larp on the other hand can hardly avoid exposing intimate experience: we cannot shut out our own histories, sorrows and desires from a game structure that takes both our minds and bodies in possession. In this sense, larp cannot totally control and flatten the nuances of a storyline the way theater can, and this is at the core of the defense of *Just a Little Lovin'* that both me and Grasmo and Edland laid out in our articles during the spring of 2011. Still, I think that the next person that entered the debate, the journalist and author Johan Hilton, did an accurate critique of the framing of the larp.

Just like when Heberlein detected Hollywood dramaturgy rather than serious research in *Bli en dåre!*, Hilton is skeptical of the number of pop cultural references made on the homepage of *Just a Little Lovin'*. He points out that the inspirational material from the organizers and the pictures that illustrate the texts seem to be mostly nostalgic kitsch from or about the Eighties, such as Grace Jones' music or the films *Torch Song Triology*, *Longtime Companion*, *Tootsie* and *54*. If the game is indeed about having a subjective understanding of an era that passed, he wants to know where the documentary material is, or whether it was too repulsive and ugly to be fitted into this aestheticized disco world. Furthermore, he makes reference to Susan Sontag's text *Illness as Metaphor*. In this text, Sontag explores how tuberculosis, cancer and other illnesses have been used in fiction for expressing character, as if the illness resulted from a state of passion in someone's inner life, rather than just being what it is. Sontag argued that this may shame and discourage people with a real

experience of illness from talking or writing about their lives outside the metaphorical frame.

As Hilton understands it, mainstream fiction has used AIDS as a metaphor very much in the sense of Sontag, for example in films like *The Hours*, the musical *Rent*, inspired by *La Bohème*, or the feel-good AIDS movie *Love! Valour! Compassion!*. In those, Hilton states, the subversive, artistic and marginalized become marked by death as a consequence of their way of life. As far as Hilton can see, *Just a Little Lovin'* takes no distance from such a logic in the presentation of the game. In his opinion, it is hard not to read in an exoticism and an apocalyptic romanticism in the imagery of young beautiful gay men partying while death knocks at the door. He therefore asks whether this narrative could supply anyone with a subjective understanding of what the AIDS epidemic was and is. Furthermore, he doubts that the organizers of the larp would be interested in examining the tragedy of demographic extinction if they also had to leave the glamorous scenery behind and work with something less aestheticized, like the starvation disaster in Ethiopia, the Tsunami or the Srebrenica massacre.

I think that Hilton might be wrong in this last assumption – not only because I know that Grasmo and Edland discussed working with questions about AIDS in Africa before they settled on the plot for *Just a Little Lovin'*, but also because larpers in general tend to do scenarios about all kinds of things, including historical and contemporary events that are potentially very sensitive. This does not necessarily mean that this is done in a thoughtful manner, which is actually just another reason to take Hilton's remarks about reproduction of clichés seriously. However, in the specific case of *Just a Little Lovin'*, Hilton's critique is interesting both because it shows how much the initial presentation of the game was dependent on reproducing images from other fiction, and because it shows how unthinkable it was for Hilton to assume that someone involved with this larp could actually have a personal relation to the AIDS epidemic. The latter is of course a mistake, even if one can understand how he draws this conclusion from the presentation that he has access to. Nevertheless, I dare state that many of the players in *Just a Little Lovin'* had at least one foot in some kind of queer community and were born in the Eighties or earlier. This implies that many of those players are likely to have friends who lost someone dear to them before the antiretroviral medicines became more efficient, likely to have been involved with AIDS activism and likely to have dealt with the added stigmatization of non-heterosexual life that the AIDS epidemic caused. For me personally, it would have taken that kind of formulation to feel motivated to play *Just a Little Lovin'*. I would have to consider it some kind of memory work, a way of grasping what friends of mine have been through, in order to not feel that I could just as well have played *Cluedo*.

I don't mean this arrogantly. I am sure there are many ways to play this game with political insight into the sensitive position of AIDS and HIV in contemporary society. However, I will not try to list other examples, since I never had any longer conversations with players and organizers about how the preparations for the game and the game frames as such encouraged reflective and nuanced ways of examining illness, love and loss. I did not participate as a player and can thus only trust people to tell the truth when they say that *Just a Little Lovin'* was an important experience for them.

In Grasmo and Edland's answer to Hilton the 5th of May, they claim that what Hilton is doing is equal to reviewing a theater poster. Possibly it would be a better analogy to say that it is equal to reviewing a theater program written and edited by the directors. This is not exactly a common critical practice, but in some cases it would be useful. How something is promoted is definitely a part of what it becomes as a whole, and even if one does not see the whole picture,

seeing a part of something is also an aesthetic experience that can make you think and feel. In the case of Teir and Hilton, this homepage obviously made them react strongly enough to write invested articles outside critical conventions, addressing a subculture and an aesthetic practice that they don't know anything about.

In this sense, the argument "don't judge a book by its cover" is weak. However, Grasmo and Edland also defend their choice to flirt with apocalyptic romanticism, making reference to Juhana Pettersson's notion "The Necessary Zombie". Pettersson's idea is that larpers in general, because of how larp has developed, fear things that connote "art" or "experimental" in relation to larp. Organizers thus need something easily grasped, such as a familiar genre element (zombies), to lure their players in. The Necessary Zombie is about making players feel that they know what they are expected to do so that they become cooperative, open and emotionally invested. For Grasmo and Edland, Grace Jones and the iconography of the Eighties serve that purpose.

However, they also assure the readers that the process and the game will be about developing characters away from the initial clichés into complex human beings. They also return to the idea of how larp engages the whole body in a system of interaction that is not entirely controllable, and thus will always break down simplistic models of the world. Furthermore, they point out that they are not interested in making a correct interpretation of an historical epoch, but that the larp is about the life of the players and the Western World's avoidance of death. They state that their scenario is primarily about examining the dialectics between desire and death anxiety through the intermediate of strong friendship. What this piece of work results in, they argue, cannot be decided before the game and the documentation thereof has been concluded. Finally, they express a hope that the debate will contribute to better criteria for judging the artistic value of larps.

Hilton's short reply, also the last word in the debate, repeats the concerns with the choice to enhance every cliché there is about AIDS. Hilton is also skeptical of the argument that bodily participation changes the approach to the clichés no matter the initial context. He quotes his experience of doing improvisation theater sessions that reminded him of larp in the sense that they were situation-based and long in duration. In his final line, he sardonically states that this indeed did not make those sessions into art.

Art

I agree that context makes all the difference, but in a slightly different way than Hilton intends it. What was actually missing in order for Hilton's improvisations to become art was not a certain level of concentration or dedication – even if it is tempting to point out that larp is often quite different from improvisation theater in its pace, its presentation of self/character, its game logic and its set-up.

No, what was missing is the same thing that larp generally has never had: contexts that frame it as art. In their last arguments, both Grasmo, Edland and Hilton have chosen to ignore the fact that what gets to be called "art" is not what holds a certain "objective quality", but what is invited or invites itself to the venues, social circles and economic fields that define art. The iconic event of Marcel Duchamp signing an urinal and exhibiting it under the name *Fountain*, Howard S. Becker's book *Art Worlds* giving an account of how processes of recognition can happen in the art field, and many other artists and theorists, can serve as examples of how difficult it is to set up stable criteria for quality in art.

That both the organizers of *Just a Little Lovin'* and its critics still make reference to such a thing might be a sign that larp as a subculture has started to knock on the doors of the artistic establishment, and that some elements that are central to larp have become more interesting to established artistic fields. If this means that

larpers in the future will be expected to take greater responsibility – also on a more official media scene – for how their games affect its practitioners and the surrounding society, I think this is something we should embrace.

Not because I necessarily believe that larp should be considered art or consider itself as such, but because this movement has nothing to lose from becoming more aware of its weaknesses and potentials. When art critics fail in having substantial things to say about our work, we should be capable of doing it better. Aesthetic responsibility has nothing to do with being accepted by journalists, artists or theorists. Rather the opposite: it is about being ready to enter in conversation about the politics of your desire with people who might not be in power over how their history is written.

So let us talk, not about abstract notions like quality, but about what larps do to us and our perception of the world, no matter if we are in it for the fun, the violence, the sex or the theory. If we manage to take into consideration what stories we are using and why – if we manage to accept the fact that we are not underdogs just because we have a slightly marginal hobby – then we will also be in a position where we may learn more than we ever imagined about which rules of reality can be altered and how.

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Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård

The Dogma 99 Manifesto

Dogma 99*, today, reads as an archaic text. It uses outdated terminology ("Plots", "LARP playwrights", "supporting parts"), to talk about obscure problems. Critics might say that our opponent — "Conventional Larp" — was always a straw man. We can at least agree that it's no longer around.*

Some of these changes can be attributed to the manifesto. The design principles it advocates have become commonplace, partially because of the Dogma larps. Dogma 99*'s definition of larp was the first such definition, but not the last. It made it fashionable to define things. Larp's nature as a medium — a flexible vehicle that can contain things both banal and profound — is now taken for granted. That was not the case in 1999, when the dominant view of larp was still that of a fan activity, of enthusiasts rehashing the tropes and aesthetics of "real" art.*

Dogma 99 *was very much a product of its time, of ideas emerging in many heads, simultaneously. It attracted plenty of attention, and spawned plenty of Internet flame-wars. Some were highly critical of the manifesto. Some published their own. But they were all, for the first time, part of the same conversation.*

— Eirik Fatland & Lars Wingård

The Vow of Chastity

I hereby submit to the rules of the Vow of Chastity, as developed by Dogma 99,

1. It is forbidden to create action by writing it into the past history of a character or the event.

2. There shall be no “main plot”.
(The story of the event must be made for each players character, not the whole).

3. No character shall only be a supporting part.

4. All secrecy is forbidden.
(Any participant who so desires shall in advance be shown all documents that pertain to the event).

5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it.
(Any use of staging and ad hoc organiser roles is forbidden).

6. Superficial action is forbidden.
(The playwrights may not in any way plan or encourage the use or threat of violence as part of the event)

7. LARPs inspired by tabletop role-playing games are not accepted.

8. No object shall be used to represent another object.
(all things shall be what they appear to be)

9. Game mechanics are forbidden.
(rules to simulate for instance the use of violence or supernatural abilities are not permitted)

10. The playwrights shall be held accountable for the whole of their work.

Furthermore, I swear to regard myself as an artist, and any LARP I write as my »work«. I stand open for criticism and wholesale slaughter of my works, and promise to apologise to my players for all that is imperfect in the LARPs I write. My highest goal is to develop the art and medium of live-action role-playing. This, I promise, will be done through all means available, and at the expense of good taste, all conventions and all popularity amongst the so-called LARPers. Thus, I take the Vow of Chastity,

Lars Wingård
Eirik Fatland
Erlend Eidsem Hansen
Kristin Hammerås
Anita Myhre Andersen
Kalle Toivonen
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Atle Steen-Hansen
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The Authors' Commentary to the Vow of Chastity

Why Dogma 99?

The Dogma 99 Vow of Chastity aims at the development of LARP as a medium and a form of art. We seek to oppose the pitfalls of conventional LARP, the dominance of the mainstream genres, and the refusal of the general public and some LARPers to recognise the potential of LARP as a medium of expression and form of art.

The Conventional LARP methods of today, those methods most often developed when adapting the tabletop role-playing medium directly to live action, are insufficient for the creation of quality LARP. The conventions, pitfalls and clichés of conventional LARP are only a first step, an infant stage which it is now time to abandon. The Conventions are the current ingrown patterns of thought about what and how LARP is, that are hard to see and even harder to avoid. The Clichés are the banal simplicities that work and are therefore repeated ad infinitum instead of inventing something new. The Pitfalls are the obvious mistakes that are repeated, by experienced and inexperienced organisers, usually because things appear differently from the organiser room than from the LARP.

While a few LARP scenes and troupes, especially in the Nordic countries, have managed to progress beyond the pitfalls of conventional LARP, most have not. Hallmarks of conventional LARP are: an emphasis on game mechanics, a high level of secrecy, structures that automatically discern between "important" and "unimportant" characters, and a dependence on gamesmaster control and intervention for the LARP to work.

Conventional LARP is based in the "gamist" style of role-playing. The gamist style creates structures that, intentionally or not, allow for a LARP to be won by some, and hence lost by others. It encourages the use of game mechanics, to create fairness, and the use of secrecy and combat, to create challenge. While we are not opposed to LARP being used for this purpose, we seek to develop the potential of LARP as a medium of expression, not as a glorified game of strategy. We also observe that the methods of conventional LARP are insufficient for fair gamist-style events.

The supreme demonstrations of the weaknesses of conventional LARP are the commercial products of the Anglo-American gaming industry. By aiming at a lowest common denominator, these publications achieve nothing beyond the infant stage, which has long been surpassed in quality and diversity by LARPers who have innovated independently. Yet, their marketing strength is so vast in comparison, we risk seeing the medium defined in the eyes of the public, not by the independent LARP artist or craftsman, but by the gaming industry and the proponents of conventional LARP.

The current mainstream LARP genres, the LARPs of fantasy and science fiction, combat, horror, mystery and magic – commonly use conventional methods. This, however, need not be so. The mainstream genres are not dependent on conventional methods, and may be enriched by the development of new methods, without the clichés and pitfalls of current convention.

While entertaining and full of potential in their own right, the current mainstream genres are too narrow in their confines and the expectations of their participants to explore the full potential of LARP as a medium. Developments in the crafts, genre adaptations, game mechanics and narration are not enough! We seek to explore

and realise the full potential of LARP as a form of art, and for this to be possible the borders the medium so far has developed within must be transcended.

We therefore launch the programme of the Vow of Chastity, which aims at creating a series of new LARPs that will be unlike any seen before. The Vow of Chastity aims at widening the borders of the medium by excluding the traditional methods of LARP creation and especially the ones used by conventional LARP. To strengthen the Dogma 99 project, the list of signatories will be permanently open. Those who wish, may take the Vow of Chastity and thereby commit themselves to organise or co-organise at least one LARP that follows the rules of the Vow of Chastity.

Dogma 99 is primarily a manifesto for LARP playwrights. Playwrights who take the Vow of Chastity place much of the freedom to form the LARP in the hands of the players. The Vow of Chastity does not say anything about what players should or should not do with this freedom.

While we certainly do not believe that the Vow of Chastity is the only way to develop the medium, we are of the opinion that resorting to such radical means is necessary to accelerate the development and diversification of LARP.

The Essence of Larp: A Definition

LARP is often erroneously called a "genre". LARP is a form and a method of individual and collective expression; LARP is a medium. This medium, as all other media (television, tabletop role-playing, theatre, the Internet..) works according to its own, unique, laws. The lack of development of the LARP medium is easily explained in organisers' lack of ability or interest in using the medium on its own terms. Instead, LARP has too often become lost in the inspiration from other media and sought to become as similar as possible to the movie, the theatre, the book, or (most often) the tabletop role-playing game.

To see the possibilities inherent in LARP, we must find these unique laws; the essence of LARP. What is it that makes LARP different from other media? Let us remove what we may without LARP ceasing to be LARP, and see what is left.

Monsters, historical settings and such associations can be avoided without problems. A LARP may take place in the present, and without occurrences of the supernatural. Individual character descriptions may be removed, the role may be that you are a member of a group who behave in a certain manner. Written material is easy to do without; oral agreements may be made as to how the LARP will function. The organiser may easily disappear; every player can write his own part. We can rid ourselves of game mechanics; everything can be improvised. You can, however, not remove the fact that the participants play roles in a fictional world. For the event to be a LARP, there must be an agreement that whatever happens is a play, and that this is something else than real life. You cannot remove the physical meeting between roles. If all players are at different locations, and never meet, they are not at a LARP together, although they are still role-playing. For the same reason, you cannot LARP alone. It is not possible to LARP together with someone who does not know that this is a play. That's trickery, not LARP, but probably loads of fun. What we are left with is:

> "A LARP is a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world."

This is hard to see because game mechanics, riddles, background stories, superficial action and other elements divert the focus away from the essence of LARP; the meeting between participants. With a foundation in this minimum definition it is easy to identify the conventions and clichés in LARP.

That LARP is a meeting between people also implies that a LARP is not the sum of all character descriptions and handbooks, but rather the sum of everything that happens from a LARP begins until it ends. LARP is action, not literature.

The Vow of Chastity Explained

1. It is forbidden to create action by writing it into the past history of a character or the event.

From the point of view of an organiser, the LARP may appear to be good because every character has an exciting story in the written background. This is a typical pitfall. From the point of view of the player, only what happens in the LARP has reality. LARP is not literature, LARP is action. The use of retrospect in the character description forces the player to relate to incidents that are not real.

The Vow of Chastity forbids all action in the written character descriptions past; all action of the story must take place during the play.

Examples as to how this may be solved, is to use fates, to leave it to the players to agree (and role-play) upon conflicts between themselves, or to use static conflicts in the backgrounds. It is not in conflict with this rule for players to invent a more detailed background, if they find this necessary for their immersion into the character.

2. There shall be no "main plot"

(the story of the event must be made for each player, not the whole)

With main plots we here mean conflicts that are meant to touch the entire LARP, but does not directly involve all characters. Main plots are another typical pitfall; the conflict is important for the organisers and those players directly involved in it, but reduces the roles of characters that do not play a part of this plot to the position of an audience. The use of main plots almost universally leads to a division between important and less important characters.

This convention probably comes from organisers seeking to replicate movies, literature and theatre. A story in the non-interactive media necessarily has a limited amount of active characters. In LARP, an interactive form of art, the amount of actors and stories is theoretically unlimited.

Examples of alternative ways to bind a LARP together:

- The LARP may contain many smaller intrigues, where the intrigues are thematically connected.
- The LARP scenario may be a slice of reality. In real life, there are no main plots.

3. No character shall only be a supporting part.

Not only must every character be directly involved in the conflicts that touch it; the character must also in its own way play the lead part of the conflict. It is therefore not permitted to write a character whose most important function in the LARP is to help or support another character.

4. All secrecy is forbidden.

(Any participant who so desires shall in advance be shown all documents that pertain to the event).

In conventional LARP, organisers often attempt to create tension by preventing the player from knowing what the organiser has planned for the character. Actually, things are often kept secret so that players or organisers are to feel important – I know something you don't know – or out of habit.

The reality of the LARP is what is acted out, not what is kept secret and becomes known only after the LARP is over or for a minority during the event. By removing secrecy, we also remove part of the competition aspect of LARP. Some players may wish to know everything before the event starts, whereas others will not. Dogma #4 implies that all plans must be made available for the play-

ers who wish to know them, not that these must be published to all players.

5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it.

(Any use of staging and ad hoc organiser roles is forbidden).

Organisers of conventional LARP use a number of methods to influence the LARP after it has begun. They do this to entertain players and to steer the event in the "correct" direction.

As organisers take control during a LARP, the players become passive. This leads to players learning to expect organiser control, even demanding it. Only a LARP entirely without organiser influence will place the real initiative in the hands of players, where it belongs. As we learn how to make LARPs work independent of organiser control and influence, it will become possible to develop more constructive and activating methods of organiser interaction.

6. Superficial action is forbidden.

(the playwrights may not in any way plan or encourage the use or threat of violence as part of the event)

The LARP medium is quite fit to create tension through the simulation of violence. The medium can, however, be used for far more than this - something which is often overseen in favour of combat. At the time of writing, it is for many LARPers difficult to imagine a combat-free LARP. We are of the opinion that it is about time playwrights and players learn to create LARPs without using these simplest methods to achieve thrill and suspense.

7. LARP inspired by tabletop role-playing games are not accepted.

LARP and tabletop role-playing are different media that, despite some similarities, work on different terms. In the tabletop role-playing game, the action is played out as the roles (players) and the fictional world (storyteller) meet. In a LARP the focus is on the roles (players) and what happens between them.

Some of the pitfalls that come from the tabletop heritage:

- The idea of "game balance" (all players must have the same opportunity to find the treasure)
- Focus on solving the riddle/completing the adventure.
- Organisers wish to control the game.
- Division between important and unimportant characters ("PC" and "NPC").

Most conventional LARP is inspired by tabletop role-playing games both in form and content. It is no longer original to make a LARP of a new kind of tabletop RPG. We also register that a majority of the clichés in current LARP, are inherited from tabletop RPG's.

The most important argument, however, for not being inspired by tabletop role-playing games is that only through these means are we able to find out what LARP as a separate medium may achieve.

8. No object shall be used to represent another object.

(all things shall be what they appear to be)

In conventional and mainstream LARP a number of signs and substitutes are used, swords are made from latex-covered styrofoam, cordial is supposed to be wine, the curtains are drawn because windows weren't invented in the middle ages, a rope is used as a city wall, tents instead of houses, make-up and masks are used to signify supernatural creatures etc.

Signs are most often an ingrown, but unfit, solution to the problems of transferring settings from other media to LARP. Exaggerated use of signs easily lead to absurdities

in the play, as it is difficult for players to remember what the different signs represent. The focus of LARP disappears in the signs. Human beings are, in this context, not to be considered "objects". A player may still be used to represent a character...

What we wish to end is the absurd certainty that for instance Styrofoam sticks are swords, and the assumption that this is the only way it can be done. The signs are not a part of the essence of LARP. Though they occasionally may come in handy, we wish to learn how to create LARP without their use.

9. Game mechanics are forbidden. (rules for the simulation of for instance the use of violence or supernatural abilities are not permitted)

By "game mechanics" we mean all rules used to simulate situations believed not to be possible to do for real in LARPs: violence, pain, intoxication, magic, poisoning et cetera.

LARP has developed from tabletop role-playing, which again has developed from strategy games. The use of game mechanics merely a fossile remnant from the strategy games, and is unnecessary and generally impractical in both LARP and tabletop role-playing. Game mechanics may be easily replaced with trust in the players' ability to improvise.

Dogma #9 does not exclude rules for other purposes than simulation; such as security rules and fates.

10. The playwrights are to be held accountable for the whole of their work.

LARP has often been perceived as a hobby. In pact with this thought, players applaud their organisers no matter the product because the organisers anyway do a good job for their hobby. To the extent criticism has appeared after an event, it has often been for purely practical matters – food, fire security and such. We are not opposed to hobbyists in this way honouring the will to do something, but it helps little when one desires to develop the medium and art form. Which criteria LARP is to be criticised according to is another discussion.

Playwrights of a Dogma-event therefore refuse to wear the Emperors New Clothes. We will be held accountable for our production, slaughtered for anything bad or imperfect, and merely receive positive criticism for what was original, well done and progressive.

The Future

We appeal to LARPers who share our goal of developing LARP as a diverse medium of expression to consider the following broad aims for the future:

The abandonment of conventional LARP – the current conventions of LARP are merely an infant stage and should be abandoned. In the future, it should be impossible to speak of "conventional" LARP, as no conventions should exist. What we in the Dogma 99 manifesto term "conventional" LARP might one day be called "primitive", "fallen" or "corrupt" LARP.

To this end; training and handbooks must be made available for new scenes and troupes of playwrights, lest they fall into the pitfalls of convention.

Diversity – LARP playwrights and scenes must diversify the genres and methods of LARP events. We seek the death of "mainstream" LARP, in that the diversity of LARP events should be so vast, no single genre or group of genres may be called "mainstream". We certainly do not want the current mainstream genres to disappear, but they should loose their dominant position.

We therefore appeal to the playwrights of the current mainstream to organise new and different LARPs, experiment with new methods, and explore or create other genres.

Publicity - LARP must become well-known in the eyes of the public as a new medium that takes diverse forms, not as a curiosity. To forward this end, LARPers should be conscious of the media attention they receive, and steer this away from "feature" coverage towards in-depth journalism.

Fundamentalist and moral-panic critics must not be allowed to choose the battleground. Active and well-planned relations with the media are the best way to achieve a good, steady and objective coverage.

Recruitment – LARP must loose its profile as a young, slightly geeky, white middle-class activity. Recruitment should aim at all levels of society, and especially at groups from which recruitment has previously been scarce. We must abandon the misconception that conventional LARP is the best way of introduction to the medium; it is not.

Communication – The links between local, regional and national LARP communities must be strengthened. Forums (including magazines, the internet and conventions) must be opened for the exchange of ideas and know-how. LARPers must document their work, experiments and experiences, and make this documentation available to the international LARP community.

An exchange of knowledge with related media (drama, theatre, movie-making, storytelling, tabletop RPG) should take place, although the differences of the media should always be taken into consideration.

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pp 32-43

Mike Pohjola

The Manifesto of the Turku School

The original context of the Turku manifesto was the emerging Nordic larp community built around the Knutepunkts and several mailing lists, magazines, and blogs. Back then it seemed like the few vocal Norwegians were all about the story, and the few vocal Swedes were all about doing everything for real. For a long time after the Manifesto was published in 2000, Finns were known to be all about the character, and everyone had to be able to pronounce "eläytyminen."

Now those national and ideological boundaries have been more or less transcended with collaborations, new theories, new cultures, new technologies, and new priorities. Nordic larp has become an established form of art, and as such is constantly changing.

Translations of the Manifesto into French, Slovak, Russian, Polish, and Italian have managed to upset many role-players from different cultures. For some of those it was the introduction to the tradition of Nordic larp, and that of Nordic larp debate. First it makes you angry, then it makes you argue, then it makes you think.

If you are new to the Manifesto, I hope it still has the power to provoke you. Welcome to the wonderful world of Nordic larp debate!

— Mike Pohjola

Foreword to the Manifesto of the Turku School

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." - George Santayana, "Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense"

The Turku Manifesto was first published in Solmukohta, roughly three years from now. It was published online a year later. This 3rd Edition is pretty much the same as that second, online one, but to be clear and pretentious, we call it third.

The Turku School made its first appearance in late 20th century on the mailing list of Finnish Live-Action Role Players' Association where the school emphasized the meaning of eläytyminen and simulation over dramatism and gamism.

In Chapter VI (shamelessly plagiarized from the Communist Manifesto, by the way) we call out for a Turkuist revolution: "Turku School supports any and all revolutionary role-players' movement directed against the current gamist and dramatist circumstances." A fancy way to say we want you to focus on character eläytyminen and society simulation.

Since its first appearance in the Finnish scene some five years ago, the Turku School has achieved pretty much all it set out to achieve. This does not mean all role players consider themselves Turkuists, but that the ideas are pretty much accepted, or at least considered before discarding. Role-playing is seen as art, the importance of eläytyminen is understood. Sure, there's work to be done, but the Revolution is on its way. And not all the thanks go to the Turku School, but for all the role-playing manifestoes and dogmas out there.

We haven't been alone in our struggles. There have been those that stood behind us and our ideals from the very start, and there have been those that joined us after heated discussions. (Just those heated discussions that the provocative style is there to create.) And yet again there are those who've managed to combine our ideas with gamism and dramatism.

The truth is, that with all this going on, the original four-way divide is fast losing significance, at least among the avant-garde of role-playing. The most interesting dramatist concepts have evolved just as much as those of the eläytyjists and simulationists. So much so that they're all transcending into something much bigger.

What the next step is, it's hard to say yet. Perhaps we'll focus on making the role-playing media popular again, now that we can roughly agree on what that media is. And that it is a media. Or perhaps role-playing will continue evolving for a long time.

Clouded is the future. Still, it seems clear the "Age of Manifestoes" (1999-2002) helped make it happen. Here's one of the makers of that era, perhaps for the last time in print: The Turku Manifesto.

Mike Pohjola
1/19/2003, Turku

Terminology:

a game: a role-playing session, not a game in the sense of somebody trying to win.

the game master: the organizer and/or writer of the game, in table-top games also the players' medium for interaction with the game world.

to eläytyä: (verb) to immerse yourself into a character, to think, experience and feel through the character.

eläytyminen: (noun) character immersion, see to eläytyä.

GM: the Game Master.

Larp: Live-Action Role-Playing game. A RPG where most action is acted out, not described.

to larp: to play in a larp RPG: Role-Playing Game.

Table-top: A RPG where most action is described, not acted out.

Turku: a city in South-Western Finland.

The Manifesto of the Turku School

The criticized and feared, acclaimed and admired Turku School is here to tell the world what role-playing is, how and why it should be done, and why everybody else is wrong. The Turku School has been named after the home town of its chief provocateurs, but living in Turku is no guarantee of quality - living somewhere else doesn't mean that you can't understand and support the Manifesto.

I - RPGs and Role-Playing

Role-playing is immersion ("eläytyminen") to an outside consciousness ("a character") and interacting with its surroundings.

Most traditional mediums are either active (the part of the creator; writing, singing, acting etc.) or passive (the part of the audience; reading, listening, watching). Role-playing, however, is a truly interactive medium - and the best and most useful of such media - because there the creative side and the receptive side are no longer separate. The experience of role-playing is born through contributing. No one can predict the events of a session beforehand, or recreate them afterwards. Also, most of the expression takes part inside the participants' heads (in the process of eläytyminen), which make role-playing games (RPGs) a very subjective form of art.

Interactivity and subjectivity are typical to RPGs, but everything else can vary greatly, depending on the game. In some games all action is described verbally and the events happen in the players' imagination, while in others the goal is to visualize everything as concretely as possible.

In some games the players focus on the story and the action, in others the purpose is to simulate the world in as much detail as possible.

There is an infinite number of ways to role-play, but one of the most popular is to divide them between live-action role-playing games ("larps") and traditional or table-top RPGs. Although it is impossible to draw an exact line, a typical larp is a game where you try to do everything as concretely as possible, and do your best to avoid any means that are not part of the game world ("non-diegetic means" or "off-game"). In a typical table-top game the game master ("GM") is the players' medium for interacting with the game world, and most things are only described, and take place only in the players' imagination.

Another way of dividing the different ways of gaming is to group them into gamist, dramatist, simulationist and eläytyjist styles. The gamist players ("munchkins") try to somehow win the game by making their character as powerful as possible - in a way turning the role-playing into strategy-gaming. The dramatist people have no true grasp for the meaning of interaction, as they think the purpose of the game is for the game masters to tell a story using the players as actors - but with no audience to tell the story to! The simulationists try to create a working society or even a world which is simulated through role-playing. The eläytyjist set the goal to becoming

the characters, to experiencing everything through the character.

While the division between the mediums of larp and table-top games does not provide any difference in quality, the second division certainly does - not all of the above styles are as well thought-out as others. As is obvious to most role-players, the dramatist and the gamist styles are inferior to the simulationist and eläytyjist styles. For the sake of objectivity, they will, however, all be here introduced.

II - The Styles: Good and Bad

Strategy games are often fun and educational. They can be a measure of your intellect, strategic thinking and ability to stretch resources to their very limit. It's fun to try to win the war at chess. It's fun to rule a nation in Civilization. It's fun to command an army unit in Necromunda. Wouldn't it be fun to try to win with just one person whose actions you could guide? No! Not unless that person is a robot with exact orders and no personality. Real people don't aim to win at the "game of life"; in fact, there is no such game! Real people aim to enjoy their life or further their personal goals, but they also have all sorts of doubts and weaknesses, which come into way of their wanting to do what they want to do: "I was going to run for the parliament, because I want to make the world a better place, but I ran into some old friends and went out for a beer, instead." That is why the gamist style does not work.Stories are fun and interesting, they can have a huge impact on mankind. Movies are often entertaining, and a good book can really make you think. And if you want to tell your own stories, nobody's keeping you from writing a short story, or a novel, or a drama, or a movie. Nobody's keeping you from composing a song, or directing a play, or choreographing a dance. But note that in those cases you are the auteur, the creator. And when your work is finished the audience will get to see it. RPGs don't work that way. If you want to tell a story (as the dramatists do), you must have the players as the audience, the auteurs, or both. If the players are the audience, you'd somehow have to stop them from interfering with the story - and thus they would become passive, and you'd have a form of theatre or story-telling. If the players are the auteurs, you can't tell a story. If they are both, as they effectively always are in RPGs, then the story is told by players, not the game master. And then there are an infinite number of little stories, all inside the heads of the players. You will have no way to know what will happen beforehand, and no way to re-create it afterwards. (This same observation can also be found in the very definition of role-playing.)

It is said that man is a social animal. This is true, for most people define themselves at least partly through social ties (job, school, hobby, nationality, social class, religion etc.). As all existing societies are imperfect and flawed, this poses a problem: people do not know themselves - they have defined their image of themselves at some early developmental stage, and can't see how it could be anything else. It would be so much better if they could try to live in a different world, or a different society, for a while, and then try to see themselves in a new light after that experience. Well, they can! Through the simulationist way of role-playing - which is, or can be, social philosophy and behavioral psychology put to practice. It can have many positive effects on players, and it's also one of the two styles the Turku School promotes.

Apart from societies, what most dictates a person's behavior, is his personality (which is in part a product of the society). It's easy to think you know yourself when you live a very sheltered life and never have any reason to leave your room - or, heaven forbid, question your own way of thinking. To find out your true self - or to check if this is really what you want to be - you need to have an outside view on yourself, or an inside view on somebody else. Living the life of another personality, another character, is just the trick to accomplish this. Another name for that is the eläytyjist style of larp-

ing, and it is the other style of larping the Turku School promotes.

You, the reader, have probably already made your mind about what styles are acceptable and what are not. Now, read on, as we further elaborate the ideals of the Turku School.

III - Role-playing as Art

Art can be broadly defined to be use of a medium with precision and individuality (which is creativity combined with personality). Thus it is possible to create art, as well as pointless entertainment, with RPGs.

When creating a game it is important to know what you want to say with the game, and how it differs from other games. If you're having hard time finding the answer, you should think again if you really should organize the game at all. If you want to tell a story, don't attempt to tell it as a role-playing game (and definitely not as a larp); think about other easily accessible mediums, like short stories instead.

Art is a very delicate thing, and certainly not all role-playing games should be classified as such. Not all even want to be! Most art today is story-telling in one form or another. But often the art is not in the story itself, but the way it is told. And although RPGs have no actual plot, the way that the many personal experiences are taken, is, in a way, up to the GM. In effect, although the content can not be predetermined, the form can be. And as the form affects the content (in the same way that the content would in active mediums also affect the form), this gives the GM a way of guiding the experience of the players. That is the GM's art.

Eläytyjist role-playing is the best currently existing method for creating experiences and emotions, and allow you to see things from a truly personal point of view. Although this, like television, is often used as a substitute for life or to allow some people to have any feelings at all, it can be much more. It can give great, subjective insight into difficult topics - and allow you to see things from different points of view. In this sense, role-playing can be called an art.

On the other hand, simulationist role-playing is the best currently existing method to simulate the actions of a small society in diverse situations. This can be, for instance, used as a tool for experimenting with different social models. I myself intend to create a working Utopia and then test it with larps and fix it where it didn't work. In this sense, role-playing can be called a (method of) science.

IV - The Cause

These days, role-playing games of all kinds are organized and played for the most obscure reasons. Many people want to sacrifice the GM's workload on the unholy altar of social relations, playing only when it coincides with meeting friends. In the same sense, some people write their games for just the same reasons, without ever asking themselves why they're doing it.

Good reasons to express yourself are telling a story (or in the case of role-playing games, creating an interesting starting point and setting for possible stories), delivering a message and developing the medium you want to express yourself with. In this sense, RPGs are as good a way to express yourself as any other medium.

Telling stories has always been important for mankind. When you have an idea for a great story, you should think about which medium would best support it - e.g. a story of the development of an anthill from creation to destruction might not work as a larp, but rather as a work of prose, a computer game or as an animated film (The above chapter was written before the movie Antz --ed.). If the story has a few obvious main characters, but you only know the beginning (if the middle and the end are, as of yet, open) then it might work as a table-top RPG. If the story's middle and end are open, but you know it's about a small society of people and the time-period

it encompasses would be relatively short and twist-packed, then you might even use larp as its medium. Notice, however, that the last two methods are not strictly about telling stories via RPG, but rather giving the world and the beginning of a story to the players and seeing what comes out. It is NOT POSSIBLE to tell pre-determined stories through RPG.

In delivering a message you should remember the same thing as with story-telling. The difference is, this time the starting point should be your message, not the idea for the story. Delivering messages through RPGs takes some skill, but when successful - thanks to the subjectivity of RPGs - gives more empiric and precise insight than any other medium. There has been relatively few experiments in this field, but larps are extremely well suited at least for criticizing the society, and table-top games for commenting on the behavior and psychology of the individual.

Developing a medium is never unnecessary - often even the worst failed attempts can teach a lot about the inner structure of the medium. Often it's not advisable to start by thinking what kind of a game you want to organize, but in these cases you must go there. When you have a wish to organize something weird - like a larp where causality doesn't work, or a table-top game where the players will try to communicate telepathically with each others - you should think about what type of a game this experiment would benefit most, and create the situation and the world around the experiment. (All the better, of course, if some particular situation or message requires this approach, but it is not condemnable to do it for honest curiosity, either.)

V - The Absolute Rule of the Game Master

The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the players enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. The players' part is to get inside their character's head in the situation where the game begins and by eläytyminen try to simulate its actions.

The object of the player should be to obey the game master's every wish concerning the style of play.

This does not mean that the game master should tell the players what their characters should do. When it comes to the things that have to do with the game, the game master has the ultimate ruling power. Not the enjoyability of the gaming session, not cell phones, not hunger, not anything. Sometimes it might be fun to do something that is not in strict accordance with the character, but - unless the GM has specifically asked you to do so - THAT IS FORBIDDEN.

The player's position in an RPG session is further elaborated in the following Player's Vow of Chastity.

VI - The Relationships Between the Turkuists and the Opposing Schools

After what has been said above, it is obvious what the relationship between the Turku School and any other schools and ways of thinking is - that is, the relationship between the Turkuists, the gamists and the dramatists.

The Turku School struggles for the immediate and long-term goals of the eläytyjist and simulationist role-players, but presently it also stands for the future of all role-playing. In Norway the dramatists are trying to re-invent theatre, but there the word of the Turku School still brings hope to the oppressed simulationists. In the United States the gamists are trying to de-evolve role-playing back into moving little pieces of plastic on a board, but even in that world of darkness the Turku School sheds light to the eläytyjist movement.

The members and friends of the Turku School are spreading the radical views of the Manifesto all around the world - lately including Stockholm, New Jersey, Helsinki, Istanbul, Vienna, Oslo and Paris. In London the local gaming store refused to sell the Manifesto because it didn't have any pictures.

Yet, despite its international achievements, even in its native Turku the school is struggling against the short-sighted, the conservative, and above all, the gamist and dramatist schools.

The Turku School now has its eyes mostly set on the Nordic countries, because they live the dawn of role-playing revolution. Compared to the Nordic countries of the early and late 1990s, this revolution is characterized by the more advanced role-playing community and especially the ever-increasing number of newbies.

Thus the role-playing revolution of Northern Europe can only be a prelude to the Turkuist revolution.

To put it shortly, the Turku School supports any and all revolutionary role-players' movement directed against the current gamist and dramatist circumstances.

In all these movements the Turkuists put the question of character eläytyminen and society simulation above all others.

The Turku School thinks it despicable to hide one's views and intentions. Turkuists openly admit that their goals can only be achieved by taking down by force the current system of role-playing. Let the gamist and dramatist classes shiver before the Turkuist revolution. The simulationists and the eläytyjists have nothing to lose but their chains. But they have the whole world to win.

TURKUIST ROLE-PLAYERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

The Larper's Vow of Chastity

Turku 1999

As a live-action role-player I hereby vow to submit to the following rules, included in the Vow of Chastity published in the Manifesto of the Turku School.

1. When playing a character and immersing myself in it, my foremost goal shall be to simulate what happens inside the character's head, and how it affects his behavior. Hollow pretence I leave for the actors.

2. I shall use no non-diegetic (out-of-game world) methods (such as background music or unrelated off-game comments) while playing, if there is any other way to play the situation. (E.g. unless the game material specifically says otherwise, when the character hits, I hit.)

If I think I see something like this in a game, I will assume them to be diegetic methods, and that my character experiences them exactly as I do, unless the game master has instructed me otherwise. (It remains the game master's duty, however, to make sure I know what level of physical and mental safety and suspension of disbelief is in use in the game.)

3. I shall learn and understand the character's person by building the self image, personality, world view and other things that make it an individual from the subconscious outwards (i.e. not via manners or such). I expect others to do the same.

4. When attempting to look and act like the character, I shall avoid stage acting. I am aware that I and my character might have different ways of speech, manners or other outward features, without them forcing me, the player, to over-act or otherwise call for undue attention.

5. I shall immerse myself in the game with the assumption that if a character or oth-

er game element seems out of place in the world or in the game - such as comical, over-acted or badly played - it is still a part of the world, not a stupid idea the player had.

6. If forced to improvise or add to my character during the game, my first and foremost goal shall be to do this by thinking about the big picture I have of the character and the game world, not trying to add surface dramatics or theatre methods. While playing, I will focus on immersing myself in my own character, not trying to improve the gaming experience of other players. I will try to be true to my character without trying to spot a story-line which I should act out. I accept the fact that as a player my part is to see only a small part of the whole.

7. I shall assume that the game master has told me everything I need to know about the game world, and what he wants his players to know about larping. I shall not attempt to use any general larping conventions in any one game, but the exact conditions given to me by the game master: if for example the off-game sign has been defined to be something, I will not substitute anything for it.

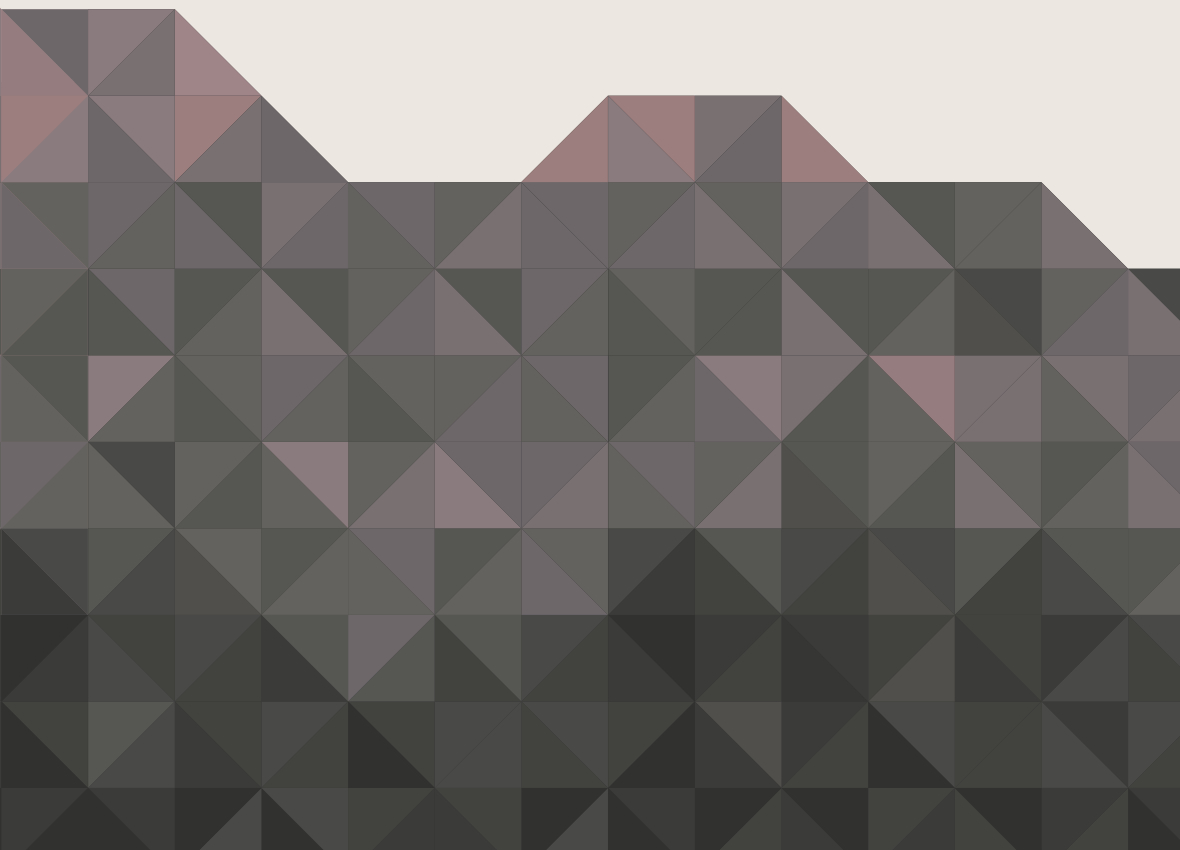
8. When attending a game, I shall not consider it to be a member of any particular genre or see its events as larp-plots that have a certain solution. Unless the game master tells me otherwise, I shall see each game as a unique work of art, which should be treated accordingly.

9. I shall not let any non-critical factors from outside the game (such as entertaining the other players, advancing the plot, guiding the newbies, off-gaming etc.) affect my playing in any way. During the game these things do not exist for me.

10. As a player I shall strive not to gain fame or glory, but to act out the character as well as possible according to the guidance given to me by the game master. Even if this means I have to spend the entire game alone in a closet without anyone ever finding out.

Furthermore, as a role-player I vow to refrain from any personal style of gaming! I do not try to play, but to mold myself after the game master's wishes. I do not try to create myself a perfect gaming session or give others short-lived pleasure, because I consider the game as a whole to be much more important than any single player's experience of the game. My greatest goal shall be to fulfill the game master's vision, forcing myself to immerse in the character as truthfully and realistically as possible. I swear to do this in all ways possible to myself, regardless of any concepts of good taste and the convenience of other players.

Endmatter



Where to Find the Original Books

We've reprinted the essays we consider most essential for understanding the Nordic larp discourse in this book, but there's a lot more to discover out there, including more games, a world of content on how to design games, information on projects using larp in educational context, and even more theory. The full text of all the books is available online at the following URLs:

- *The Book*, 2001, Ed. Anette Alfsvåg, Ingrid Storrø & Erlend Eidsem Hansen
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/The_Book
- *As Larp Grows Up*, 2003, Ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup & Mikkel Sander
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/As_Larp_Grows_Up
- *Beyond Role and Play*, 2004, Ed. Markus Montola & Jaakko Stenros
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Beyond_Role_and_Play
- *Dissecting Larp*, 2005, Ed. Petter Bøckman & Ragnhild Hutchison
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Dissecting_Larp
- *Role, Play, Art*, 2006, Ed. Thorbiörn Fritzon & Tobias Wrigstad
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Role,_Play,_Art
- *Interacting Arts International Edition. Radical Role-playing*, 2006, Ed. Gabriel Widing
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Interacting_Arts
- *Lifelike*, 2007, Ed. Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade & Line Thorup
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Lifelike
- *Playground Worlds*, 2008, Ed. Markus Montola & Jaakko Stenros
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playground_Worlds
- *Larp, the Universe and Everything*, 2009, Ed. Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland & Even Tømte
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Larp,_the_Universe_and_Everything

- *Playing Reality*, 2010, Ed. Elge Larsson
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_Reality
- *Think Larp*, 2011, Ed. Thomas Duus Henriksen, Christian Bierlich, Kasper Friis Hansen & Valdemar Kølle
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Think_Larp_-_Academic_Writings_from_KP2011
- *Talk Larp*, 2011, Ed. Claus Raasted
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Talk_Larp_-_Provocative_Writings_from_KP2011
- *Do Larp*, 2011, Ed. Lars Andresen, Charles Bo Nielsen, Luisa Carbonelli, Jesper Heebøll-Christensen & Marie Oscilowski
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Do_Larp_-_Documentary_Writings_from_KP2011
- *States of Play*, 2012, Ed. Juhana Pettersson
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/States_of_Play:_Nordic_Larp_Around_the_World
- *The Book of Kapo*, 2012, Ed. Claus Raasted
 http://rollespil.dk/images/ROLLE|SPIL/kapo.pdf
- *Crossing Physical Borders*, 2013, Ed. Katrine Øverlie Svela & Karete Jacobsen Meland
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Crossing_Physical_Borders
- *Crossing Habitual Borders*, 2013, Ed. Katrine Øverlie Svela & Karete Jacobsen Meland
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Crossing_Habitual_Borders
- *Crossing Theoretical Borders*, 2013, Ed. Katrine Øverlie Svela & Karete Jacobsen Meland
 http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Crossing_Theoretical_Borders

Biographies

Anders Gredal Berner started organising larps in 1997. *KAPO* wasn't his first big international larp — he did the 100-person alternate history larp *Vaterland* in 2009 — but he's mostly known for his work on children's larp. In his professional life, Anders is one of the two owners of Danish larp company Rollespilsakademiet. He's also the chairman of the national organisation, Bifrost, and is active both in Denmark and abroad working to get larp accepted as both media and an art form by doing lobby work and talking to politicians, the press, and municipal officials.

Andie Nordgren is a Swedish larper, writer, producer, and organizer in the Nordic Larp community. She initiated the video lecture series *Nordic Larp Talks* to make larp theory and projects accessible outside the community and has contributed to multiple publications on larp and participation such as the *Interacting Arts* magazine, the *Nordic Larp* book, and the Knutepunkt book *Playground Worlds*. She was the producer on the iEmmy winning pervasive game *Sanningen om Marika* (The Truth About Marika). Currently living in Reykjavik, Iceland, Andie is the Senior Producer for science-fiction MMO/virtual world *EVE Online*.

Bjarke Pedersen has played, designed and organised larps since the late nineties. He is one of the founders of Denmark's largest larp-organization Rollespilsfabrikken. His work spans everything from children's larps to interactive performance pieces at major international art museums in Europe and USA. More information about his work can be found at http://bjarkep.com.

Eirik Fatland is one of the "old farts" who have influenced and been influenced by the inter-Nordic larp conversation since its beginning in 1997. He is known as a designer of dark, ambitious larps with political themes (*Europa*, *Inside:Outside*, and *PanoptiCorp*), strongly narrative and occasionally comedic larps (*Moirais Vev*, *Marcellos Kjeller*, *What Happened at Lanzarote*), and as a theorist and educator of larp design. He is in possession of a Norwegian passport and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Art and Design Helsinki.

Eleanor Saitta is a hacker, designer, artist, writer, and barbarian. She makes a living and vocation of understanding how complex systems operate and redesigning them to work, or at least fail, better. She's new to the Nordic larp community but has had pieces in the past two Knute-books and is looking forward to more. Eleanor is nomadic and lives mostly in airports and occasionally in London, New York, and Stockholm. She can be found at http://dymaxion.org and on Twitter as @dymaxion.

Emma Wieslander is a long time larper and roleplayer who works in leadership and organisational development. She has a deep commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Emma's main contribution to the Nordic larp scene has been in broadening the field of play with respect to moods and themes and also, by talking of larps as political, enabling play that deals with gender and class. To do this Emma designed the *Ars Amandi* method and the strategy of Positive Power Drama, as well as the game they were made for: *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea).

Gabriel Widing is a scriptwriter and performance maker based in Stockholm. He was the editor of the *Interacting Arts* magazine from 2002 to 2007 and co-wrote the book *Deltagarkultur* (Participatory Arts) with the same crew, published in 2008. He has written reality games as well as larp scenarios, the most recent one being *2027 - Life after Capitalism* in 2012. Gabriel is now more oriented toward participatory performance. In recent years he has done "avatar" works with *Nyxxx* where audience members are directed by instructions in headphones and thereby collectively perform the piece. Website: http://interactingarts.org/widing/

Heidi Hopeametsä has an MA in folklore studies from Helsinki University. Her research focused on live roleplaying games, the player's experience and flow-states in play. Currently she lives in Geneva, Switzerland, and designs fashion and human interaction. Her academic background in folklore and game studies now serves in creating artistic and social projects, such as creative sewing classes for immigrants. She also teaches zumba and designs urban fashion for her own label Mata de Prata.

Helene Willer Piironen is 30 years old, lives in Copenhagen, and has been roleplaying since 2003 and larping since 2007. Playing more larps abroad than in Denmark, she considers herself an international larper and her approach on analyzing larps is very much from a player's perspective. In 2011 she had her debut as a producer, as part of the core organisation group of Knudepunkt in Denmark, and in 2013 she was part of the team producing and re-running *Just a Little Lovin'*, a Nordic larp from Norway. Currently she is working and studying to be a teacher.

Jaakko Stenros (M.Soc.Sc.) works as a game researcher and a doctoral candidate at the Game Research Lab (University of Tampere). He is an author of *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (2009), as well as an editor of three books on role-playing games, *Nordic Larp* (2010), *Playground Worlds* (2008), and *Beyond Role and Play* (2004). He lives in Helsinki, Finland.

Johanna Koljonen is a Finnish writer and broadcaster working mostly in Sweden. She works in television, radio, and cross media productions to give her time to write books, comics, and game design analysis. Johanna has been a larper for twenty years and a critic and theorist of Nordic larp for almost as long, and hosts the annual *Nordic Larp Talks*. She has a BA in English literature from Oxford University. Website: http://johannakoljonen.com

Johanna MacDonald is a Canadian-born-and-raised performer living in Helsinki. She works in theatre, performance art, writing, stand-up comedy, drag king shows, punk music, game design and participatory art design, roleplaying, and also with video and visual design. She is always looking for ways to bring attention to things we choose to forget.

Juliane Mikkelsen was one of the original "Girls in Armour", a Danish feminist larp project. Prior to *KAPO* she had no larp organising experience, but she has since run a larp about dancing superheroes in the USA. In her daily life, she works with makeup and special effects, and if you pick up your *Nordic Larp* book, she's the redhaired boxing woman from the *System Danmarc* article.

Kristoffer Thurøe is 31 years old, lives in Copenhagen, and has been larping since 1996. For the first ten years he only played games, but he has since created games such as *System Danmarc* (2005), *Totem* (2007), *Delirium* (2010), and he was a part of the organizing team for Knudepunkt in Denmark in 2007 and 2011. He is a pioneer of pre-larp workshops, a teacher at the Larpwriter Summer School, and thinks that things should be tested and evaluated instead of discussed to death. Currently he is studying journalism to become a facilitator.

Lars Munck (MFA) is a freelance illustrator and story artist. In the Nordic larp scene, Lars is an experienced larper and co-organiser. He organised the first known larp in sign language *Mytteriet* in 2004 and was the initiator of the collectively-organised larp *The White Road* in 2006. In later years, Lars has focused on bridging larp and the visual arts, as he did in his quirky new-journalism series *The Escape to Hollywood*, published in the major Danish newspaper *Politiken*. The illustrated storyboard-diary visually captured his pervasive exploration of the American film industry. He is now creating a homestead in Skåne.

Lars Wingård is a Norwegian larpwright, actor, stage director, puppeteer, scriptwriter, and math teacher. As of 2013 he lives in Turku. Wingård was influential in the "big leap" in Norwegian larp from 1997 to 2001. A close friend and larp colleague of the larp designers Erlend Eidsem Hansen and Eirik Fatland, they pushed the idea of art and seriousness into the Oslo larp scene at the end of the 1990s.

Margrete Raaum has been active in the Norwegian larp community since 1992 and has organized larps since 1998, including *1944*, *1942*, and *Once Upon a Time*. She has been involved in Knutepunkt since the first one in 1997.

Marie Holm-Andersen lives in Copenhagen and started larping in 2000. Though she has mostly larped in Denmark, larp has taken her as far away as Palestine and the US. She is a former member of the board of the Danish role play association *Bifrost*, and she was part of the organizing team behind Knudepunkt in 2011. Though she does game design from time to time, she is most comfortable in the role of the producer. Currently, she is one of the primary forces behind the community of experimental roleplay situated in Copenhagen's biggest culture house, *HUSET-KBH*.

Markus Montola (PhD) is a game designer and a game scholar. During his ten years of working with games he has been a researcher at University of Tampere and Nokia and a game designer at Grey Area. He currently works at the oldest Finnish game studio, Housemarque. In addition to his award-winning doctoral dissertation *On the Edge of the Magic Circle*, he is an author of *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*, and an editor of *Nordic Larp*, *Playground Worlds*, and *Beyond Role and Play*. In 2011 he won the Ropecon lifetime achievement award Golden Dragon together with Jaakko Stenros.

Martin Ericsson aka. Elricsson is a participation and interaction writer by trade and has been a part of the nordic larp scene since the early nineties. He counts *Hamlet*, *Carolus Rex*, *Prosopopeia*, and *Monitor Celestra* among his sins and has worked with folks ranging from Tim Kring to Bill Bridges. Recently he's done a stint as content writer for CCP games on the *World of Darkness* MMO and done some modeling for Vampire books. He's terribly excited about the upcoming bronze-age tribal game *Koi-Koi* for fairly obvious reasons.

Mike Pohjola is a Finnish writer and game designer. Professionally he is responsible for two novels, a stage musical, screenplays, transmedia scripts, and four tabletop role-playing games. He has designed, written, and run dozens of larps both at art festivals and for the larp community. He wrote the *Turku Manifesto* in 1999 and still likes Aristotle and eläytyminen. Pohjola co-founded The Company P and Pohjola-filmi, through which he received an Emmy Award, two BANFF Awards, and a Prix Europa. His most recent professional endeavor is *Age of the Tempest*, a tabletop role-playing game aimed at beginners.

Peter Munthe-Kaas is a Danish larp designer and has contributed to the making of the larps *System Danmarc* (2005), *Totem* (2007), *Delirium* (2010), and *Kapo* (2011). Peter is particularly engaged in the Danish style of pre-larp workshopping, where large parts of the larp experience is co-created by the players and designers (http://workshop-handbook.wordpress.com). Find Peter at http://www.munthe-kaas.dk/blog.

Peter Schønnemann Andreasen is a Danish larp designer. He was the creative director of *System Danmarc* (2005), conceptual founder of the co-created games *Totem* (2007) and *Delirium* (2010), and a Ropecon guest of honour in 2008. He graduated from the National School of Performing Arts in 2012. He now remorsefully neglects larp as he toils in the fields of theatre and modern dance as a production and stage manager.

Simo Järvelä is a cognitive scientist working on media and games research at Aalto University. He has been playing tabletop roleplaying games for 25 years and actively larping since 1995. In addition to writing articles his recent work includes organizing a 14-part street larp campaign *Neonhämärä* (2008-2012) in Helsinki together with Niina Niskanen.

Staffan Rosenberg (née Jonsson) is a game producer, designer, scholar, and technical producer. During his 13 years of working in larp and related projects he has been a key player in creating games as *Viljan*, *Prosopopeia*, *Momentum, Dollplay*, the Emmy-winning *Sanningen om Marika*, the Emmy-nominated *Conspiracy For Good*, *The Monitor Celestra*, and many others. Currently he is designer and technical producer on a game about the difficulties of a working as a policy maker for the Swedish Government.

Tobias Wrigstad is an associate professor in Computer Science at Uppsala University. He has been a role-player for 30 years and active in the rules-light freeform roleplaying scene in Sweden since 1996. He's the author of more than 30 convention scenarios and has worked as an organiser and writer on numerous larps. Tobias was the editor of the Knutpunkt book *Role, Play, Art* (2006) together with Thorbiörn Fritzon and the author of two Knutpunkt journal articles in 2008. He is a founding member of the *Vi åker jeep* roleplaying collective and lives in Stockholm, Sweden with his wife and daughter.

Tor Kjetil Edland made his first larp in 1998. In addition to *Mad about the Boy*, his resume includes *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Limbo*, *New Voices in Art*, and *Kristianiabohemen*. He has been part of organising the Nordic Knutepunkt convention three times.

Tova Gerge is a writer and performer living in Stockholm. The last few years, s/he has been involved with a number of stage art productions that examine the borders between games and representation, mostly in the context of the theatre *ung scen/öst* and with the collective *Nyxxx* (see http://nyxxx.se). S/he also has a long history of organizing larps, writing larp theory, and last but not least larping on the Nordic scene.

Trine Lise Lindahl has participated in and run larps since 1997, including *Screwing the Crew*, *Till Death Do Us Part*, and *Mad about the Boy*. She was one of the main contributors at the Oslo Larp Factory, has been involved in organizing three Knutepunkts in Norway, and is one of the editors of the book of larp scripts *Larps from the Factory*.

Ulrik Lehrskov-Schmidt has graduate degrees in analytical philosophy and finance from Aarhus and Harvard Universities, respectively. He once applied for a PhD but didn't get it. He has worked in public management and as a management consultant and now owns and runs a conference business and industry media outlets in commercial real estate. He has played tabletop and larp since age 10, been the head of the then Danish national larp and tabletop association *Sleipner* at far too young an age, and been heavily involved in Fastaval, a Danish convention known for experimental tabletop.

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